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NORTHWICH,



JULY 24th, 1897.

The Artist-Curator as Active Citizen: Curatorial Research, Institutions and Community Space.

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
the Manchester Metropolitan University for the degree of Master
of Philosophy**

Department of Contemporary Arts/ Institute For Performance
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Fig.1 *Father, Skating* poem by Angela Topping seen in vinyl lettering on the gallery wall and textile artwork, *Lean Into The Wind* by Maria Walker being exhibited in the VAC pop up gallery in Northwich.

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Abstract

The Artist-Curator as Active Citizen: Curatorial Research, Institutions and Community Space.

The institutions that we attend, that are provided for us within our communities, or that we self-build and are community-led, create frameworks that we use to establish cultural meanings. Where such cultural infrastructure is missing from a community the artist-curatorial researcher can employ new institutional strategies of public dialogue and civic action in exploration of the nature and possibilities for implementing new frameworks that hold significance for the communities that utilise them.

The inquiry has explored the wider discourses of new institutionalism to develop understandings of how such methodologies can operate outside of established arts world frameworks to develop contemporary art exhibitions and counter-public space within a semi-rural community. Thus reaching new audiences through a critical curatorial practice, more often located in a city based sphere of contemporary arts.

An important feature of this work is its concern to explore how such a critical agenda – that attempts to challenge how various identified boundaries between artists, audiences and institutions can come about at a local level. This discussion then, centres primarily on projects and initiatives, developed in the Northwich area of Cheshire West and Chester. It involves specific dialogue with council officials, artists and communities of that locality. As such, this is to be seen as a case study with specific characteristics, which may not be universal, but nonetheless constitute substantial insights for further research of this kind.

Introduction and background to the study

In April 2009 I began a twenty-four week arts and museums traineeship funded by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council; this was located within Staffordshire Arts and Museums Service, where I worked as part of a multidisciplinary team across different types of institutional framework. This included gallery and museum environments, outreach activities and audience development. Whilst there I began to consider the different types of institutional tensions that an artist - working for a local authority arts and museum service provider, was exposed to, and the various ways of how this might impact on the development of artistic practice by those in receipt of public funding. It became clear that certain remits needed to be attended to, such that outcomes could be effectively measured in terms of their value as 'socially engaged', 'public engagement' or 'educational' projects.¹ Another part of my role at Staffordshire Arts and Museums Service was to undertake a report into local authority arts funding practices. As part of that research I became aware that my own local arts team in Northwich was being displaced as the non metropolitan district of Vale Royal ceased to exist in April 2009 and was instead replaced by the non metropolitan, unitary authority of Cheshire West and Chester. As part of this process The Vale Royal Borough arts officer ceased to exist and dedicated funding opportunities for small grants for artist groups in the area were abolished.

As an independent artist-curator engaged in the production of artworks as well as developing a broader engagement with how such products find their audiences, I began to question whether there might be an awkward lacuna between the artists and the institutions they depend upon to validate them. Such

¹ See these guidelines for further information
<http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/museumandgalleries/CommunityArtsFund/CommunityArtsFund.aspx>
http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Understanding_the_appraisal_process_June_2013.pdf
<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/grants-arts/information-sheets/>

possible dichotomies may be seen to be apparent when the artist feels that his/her creative integrity becomes susceptible to compromise in the need to fulfill certain agendas through very specific and accountable ways. Moreover, I questioned whether this relationship provided sufficient opportunity to include such discursive artistic practices that opened up possibilities for institutional critique – thereby possibly generating unhelpful situations where artists may be considered to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’. I was sympathetic to the views, for example of the artist, Sonya Dyer who in 2007 published an article exploring the possibility for autonomy and freedom in the construction of artworks. Dyer stressed that there was:

A need for visual artists to stop being so acquiescent to structures they spend time and energy complaining about. There should be more constructive rebellion and critique, to support each other and ourselves in autonomous endeavours (Dyer, 2007: 32).

She suggests that:

One way to do this is to release ourselves from the psychological grip public funding has on the minds of many artists... the canny artists needs to find ways in which to support their practice (ibid).

Finding myself increasingly interested in determining how my own artistic practice could develop in line with these questions, in October 2009 I embarked upon a bursaried research preparation masters degree at MMU. This gave me opportunity to explore through praxis² the possibilities for an artist/curator relationship, giving rise to new ways of providing audience encounters. Specifically I looked at notions of authorship, the democratisation of institutional space, the fetishisation of the art object and the potential for opening up discourse around the production and consumption of artworks. Although it must be said that many celebrated artists have been able to maintain a clear

²Nelson reveals that practical knowledge of how to do something is only possible through *praxis*, an imbrication of theory and practice. Nelson reveals that it is within such praxis that insider-practitioner perspectives can emerge ‘if only as one mode of symbolic articulation (not necessarily in words) of evidence of process.’ (Nelson:2006:107) ‘Practice-as-research projects...would appear to fit much more readily into the ‘knowledge how to do things’ than the factual knowledge-producing category,’ (Nelson:2006:107)

voice that openly questions the means through which artistic production is disseminated, packaged and consumed; as an artist/curator more concerned with the local, semi-rural, grass roots agendas – such initiatives may be seen to be harder to implement and build engaged audiences for.

I had re-entered the academic system after a five-year period of professional practice where I had worked freelance as an artist and in arts and museums and community contexts, and for an extended period as an employee in a commercial setting before the economic recession led to my redundancy. This awareness of the wider political field of economic fragility underpinned my return to academia and I became increasingly determined that my research should maintain an outwardly enterprising and professional edge in addition to generating new knowledge within a community to be eventually disseminated amongst other early career curatorial and community focused practitioners. It was in this economic-political climate that I became more interested in the institutional freedoms and limitations that the academic research context provided, and I planned to examine the slippages and tensions between artistic and professional contexts as an intrinsic part of the ongoing research.

Throughout this period of development my research interest increasingly moved towards exploring understandings of institutional critique as they could manifest within my own practice. Initially during my MA studies my practice had been situated within Axis Arts Centre, a University housed art centre part of Manchester Metropolitan University's Cheshire campus. I had initiated curatorial projects there in The Axis Open Space, a large foyer area with wall and floor space that is sometimes utilised as a gallery. Projects I initiated there included *Encounters and Documents* (2010), *Memory B(l)anks* (2011) and *Flout* (2011).

I was commissioned by Jodie Gibson the Axis Art Centre's Community Outreach Director to collaborate with community groups OCEAN, and Springfield School and filmmaker Gem Harding on a project for Chester Performs *Up The Wall*

Festival (2011). The *Up The Wall* project brought up many interesting conflicts about authorship and participation because for a variety of reasons none of the collaborators were able to attend the final event, a performance held in the evening. This made me want to explore how my curatorial research might engage with community members with greater depth to build a more engaged audience for the work I was to programme. Early reading around the subjects of community practice, participatory arts and new institutionalism combined with a growing awareness about impact agendas for academic research³, compelled me to explore how forms of knowledge sharing through creative praxis could be located outside of the white cube academic space of the University housed arts centre. In pursuing a programme of study at MPhil level the research inquiry continued to move forward to explore how curatorial practice research could function at the interstice of institutional frameworks in public, professional and research contexts in a semi-rural town context.

The writing that follows serves as the critical complementary writing for my praxis that offers a context for this research inquiry, and further foregrounds how such ideas form the basis of my direct and self-reflexive engagement with the diverse activities I have been involved with over the period.

This MPhil is brought forward as a culmination of a first stage of an investigation, identifying a critical territory for a praxical enquiry that seeks to explore curatorial research methodologies and develop practitioner insights as an artist-curator and scholar-activist.

An important feature of this work is its concern to explore how such a critical agenda – that attempted to challenge various identified boundaries between artists, audiences, institutions,⁴ could come about at a local level. This discussion

³ I became aware of the notion of Impact as assessed by The Research Excellence Framework 'Impact' is any effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia. (REF, 2014) See <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/REF%20Brief%20Guide%202014.pdf>

⁴ I utilise the term, institution to refer to local authorities, funding bodies, universities, and established art galleries, etc.

then, centres primarily on projects and initiatives developed in the Northwich area of Cheshire West and Chester. It involves specific discourses and interactions with the Axis Arts Centre, a University housed arts centre based within Manchester Metropolitan University: Cheshire Campus. Others involved included Cheshire West and Chester council officials and artists, community volunteers and members of the public in the Northwich locality. The study was also informed by informal discourse with other researchers during my involvement in the Talent Incubator Network research seminar series that gave us insights to the practices and future plans for large-scale arts institutions in the wider region such as Tate, Liverpool, The Cornerhouse/Home project and The Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. It is also informed by international discourses in arts research discussed with creative professionals during my attendance in research trips to Austria for the IUGTE International conference on Performing Arts Management, Immigrant Movement International, Queens New York, and The Curating Degree Zero Archive in Zurich, Switzerland. As such, this MPhil is to be seen as a snapshot of a civic embedded case study, influenced by a local, national and international arts discourse, that developed specific characteristics on a local level, which may not be universal, but is informed by this wider field of research practice and nonetheless constitutes substantial insights for further research of this kind.

What is imperative to remember in this study is that it was by no means a solo effort. It was a collective endeavour at many stages, particularly during The Visual Arts Cheshire project, that I developed and directed with co-directors Alan Carr and Gill Snowball, where decision-making was shared amongst us equally. This research project was funded with the support of a research bursary from The Department of Performance Research at Manchester Metropolitan University and through small grants from Northwich Town Council and financial support in the form of reduced rent and business rates from Chester West and Chester Council. It would not have been possible without the voluntary time of artists and members of the Visual Art Cheshire gallery and members of the public for example Charlotte Peters Rock who independently lobbied local

councilors. The VAC gallery project was also delivered in partnership Nick Hughes from the charitable organisation Development of The Arts in Northwich.

Because the focus of this study is on my own development as a curatorial researcher, I discuss the projects from my own personal insider position. I had a particular interest in exploring strategies within my own local communities in order to implement criticality within my ongoing research methodology that combined both scholarly and professional community arts practice. It is for that reason that specific points within my own personal practice are identified and described in the text below. They have been selected to exemplify how these practitioner insights resonate and connect with the range of activities I have been involved with over the period, as artist, curator, member of an artist co-operative, fundraiser, collaborator, citizen, etc.

Methodologies

The Practice as Research (PaR) methodology is developed from Nelson (2006) who reveals that practical knowledge of how to do something is only possible through *praxis*, an imbrication of theory and practice.

The concept of praxis is a useful approach as my curatorial practice was concerned with a range of interconnecting activities both scholarly and curatorial action based that inform one another, and as I was not simply concerned with working with artists to create exhibitions of artworks as a final product. More specifically I was concerned with facilitating an engaged audience for the work and facilitating what Nicolas Bourriaud, (2002) described as 'social interstice'. My own methodology for creating social interstice manifested through interventionist curatorial action, creating new institutional structures for communities and audiences to encounter contemporary art and to share discourse about the cultural frameworks we inhabit. My role then, existed somewhere between curator, artist and facilitator working towards the conditions for;

An art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.’ (Bourriaud, 2002:14)

However, my inquiry departed from relational aesthetics focus on event based happenings and from the methodologies employed by many of the artists who worked with Bourriaud in exhibitions such as *Traffic* (1996)⁵ where conviviality and interactivity were themes explored within artworks themselves. Rather I was concerned with exploring the relational potential of the curatorial structures, the civic possibilities for my curatorial engagement, how expanding the institutional frameworks of my practice might have effect within a civic realm for community engagement and development. I was not only concerned with exploring particular themes within the exhibitions I programmed as I have done in past exhibitions. In fact, an exhibition as an end point itself was not the driving focus of this research. Rather, it was the process of the inquiry and the types of social interstice it could explore in the field that I was most concerned with. It was important to the ethics of my inquiry that I developed discourses between myself as curator, the artists I worked with, and members of the public, about the potential direction for the curatorial practice to emerge within the community. I wanted to ensure that this process occurred in a responsive manner to the sets of circumstances that developed during the timeframe of the project.

In utilising the term social interstice, my methodology for curatorial practice as research manifested as a pathway of symbolic articulations and a collision of discourses that used the academic process to uncover questions and facilitated the opportunity to create new knowledge with the communities of people I worked with. Sullivan’s insight to the curatorial research process is useful here:

There is an obvious artistry to the curator’s quest. This is shaped by an equally rigorous attention to scholarship. Curatorial practice also has an educational intent that seeks to challenge and inform an audience... There is an imaginative tenacity that moves beliefs beyond blind faith and into thoughtful actions (Sullivan, 2005: 138)

⁵ Carl Freedman ‘s review of *Traffic* is helpful to understand more about the works in the exhibition. <https://frieze.com/article/traffic>

Sullivan highlighted many features of the research process that are implicit within my own praxis, particularly where it seeks to share artworks with gallery visitors to stimulate different types of tacit knowledge and thought processes giving rise to a range of challenges that may produce unexpected new insights. This approach enabled me to develop methods that facilitated different types of dialogues within the process itself, such that the process of making exhibitions functioned in a loop with each phase informing the other. Knowledge formation can occur at many stages of this looping process, as Nelson suggests in PaR '*such perspectives constitute a form of 'know-how', knowledge in its own right.*' (Nelson, 2006:107) I considered my curatorial practice to be as much an investigatory and experimental process as I did my own individual artistic practice.

There has been much written in recent years on the role of the artist-curator; Graham and Cook's *Rethinking Curating* (2010) formulated the notion of the 'adjunct curator' who works independently but in collaboration with institutions (2010: 151). In many ways this type of curator is a useful analogy for my own role as a bursaried researcher who writes her own research brief, thereby operating at the interstice of institutional and freelance agendas. The adjunct curator has more autonomy to experiment with programming without obligation to long-term aims and objectives of the institution and increases the possibility of avoiding instrumentalised outcomes.⁶ It differs from the traditional gallery or museum curator who is employed as part of the permanent institutional team who may have greater resources but whose position may avoid risk leaving them vulnerable to the influence of contractual agreements and ingrained institutional ideologies which can be difficult to shift from the inside. The adjunct brings an outsider perspective that can more easily disrupt normative frameworks of behaviour whilst retaining the institutional partnership support that entirely independent curatorial practices may lack.

⁶ It should be noted that this whilst this inquiry has been shaped by a largely independent pathway similar to if it had been a freelance study, it has been publicly funded through the university institution and held accountable to academic frameworks and has thus been shaped by those factors in its duration of study.

Documentation is employed throughout the course of the inquiry to record dialogue with artists, other cultural agents and the local public in order to provide evidence to comply with academic regulations. As a new institutional inquiry the research process worked at the interstice of community based and academic practice and returned to the academy at points during its process. Documentation of the inquiry was disseminated in an exposition style format where I submitted materials collected in the process of research in community based settings to its own curatorial process and returned it to the academy. Invited by Dr Jane Linden in line with her Curating Knowledge style expositions; I opened up and disseminated the research process for other researchers, students and academics to engage with. I conceptualised this intervention at Manchester in the Axis Open Space as a snapshot or an excavation of my studio research process. I presented a studio style exposition of my writings, research documents, photographs, exhibition plans, exhibition ephemera such as exhibition posters and dvds of interactions between artists and the public. However, that part of the research exegesis did not form the complete body of research in itself. It was through the practice of embodied curatorial action, that knowledge about the community I was working within was generated. The research inquiry developed as a process rather than as a product.

Curatorial Practice

The curatorial task proves to be a flexible, dynamic, and contingent constellation of operations and positions, a specific form of criticality in the art field. (Von Bismarck, 2011)

The quote above demonstrates the importance from the outset of this inquiry to establish that the unbounded, performative approach to curatorial practice is important; leading as it does, away from the notion of 'curating', which according to Maria Lind can be read as the technical modality of art institutions, a predefined act and towards a more responsive modality, 'the curatorial' which suggests an unbounded and fluid, diverse inquiry based mode consisting of multiple processes of meaning making and relationship forming:

A more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth, a presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas (Lind, 2012:20)

It is through such curatorial approaches, manifesting through interactions with multiple entities as cited above, that located my research inquiry. The core of the curatorial research was not only the exhibitions I curated or programmed in this process rather, the essence of the research manifested during a performative process developing criticality through engaging in different types of discourses that bridged practical action based research in a community field with scholarly and theoretical based research practices.

There are of course, many different modes of curatorial practice; Robert Cozzolino, curator of modern art at The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, compiled a list, a work in progress titled *Job Description (part one)*⁷ that includes analogies as weird and wonderful as '*Curator as Ventriloquist*' and '*Curator as Coal Mine Canary*' (Cozzolino, 2013:online). His article illustrates that the curatorial function is multifarious, much debated and crosses over into disciplines other than contemporary art. Robert Storr addressed the question of whether curators are artists. He suggested that although, '*art engenders itself within its sign system through the 'agency' of 'producers'*', (Storr, 2005:online) curators should emulate good editors, '*content to function as the probing but respectful 'first reader' of the work/manuscript,*' (ibid) rather than attempt to demand creative authority and regarding the work of artists as a medium to bend to their own will. In doing so he suggests that the 'curator as editor' can function to '*extract the best... so that the subsequent dialogue between their work and the public be of the highest and most open-ended order.*' (ibid) Storr proposed that in recent years there has been an inversion of power structures in contemporary art so that authorial roles are in constant flux.

⁷ Cozzolino, R (2013) Robert Cozzolino Curator of Modern Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, <http://artjaw.com/robert-cozzolino>

The terms I applied to own curatorial practice were fluid throughout the research process. I initially perceived myself as the 'curator as artist', then as my work became more scholarly as 'curator as researcher'. When engaged in exhibition making, facilitating the work of others and programming new work I considered myself 'curator as programmer'. When I worked with an institution to facilitate self initiated projects with a community, the adjunct curator, when I initiated meetings between my collaborators, members of the public and local authority officers, I utilised Nicola Triscott's notion of the 'curator as diplomat',⁸ (2008). The notion of 'curator as mediator' was useful when engaging in discourse with a non-arts going public by introducing more contemporary works to the market town context. This term was applicable to my praxis when discussing my role during the *Communi-Sumption* exhibition addressed later in this text where I inhabited the gallery space as to help create dialogue and verbal interpretation of the work. I reflected on these different labels which were all applicable within my practice at different trajectories of the process as it evolved through criticality.

In conversation with Urs Lehni, design practitioner Sarah Owens (2013) suggested that her design students identified themselves as mediating agents, who transformed matter to alter its value, so that others may appreciate it and gain greater depth of understanding. Owens suggested that whilst considered in a similar vein to curatorial methodology, their notion of mediating action was to be understood as more neutral than that of the curatorial practitioner who traditionally demanded a greater level of authority. Instead the design students viewed their position as more neutral, equivalent to a filter that sifts and modifies material to provide new context. Curator Amanda Cachia, classified the mediator type of curator as infrastructural activists who are:

⁸ As a curator- diplomat Triscott's aim is to '*cultivate art as a space for communication: to open up inspiring and critical meeting places between artists, scientists and society and to explore how we can work with our constituencies to investigate and find meaning in those places. The Latour-ian diplomat is exploring a new reality. By both being an open representative of their own 'collective' - a word Latour uses to describe a group of people with a broadly similar viewpoint - and yet detached from it, the diplomat is essential to the negotiations necessary for two collectives to communicate.*' Triscott, N (2008) *A Curator-Diplomat in the Space Between*.

Process shapers' and 'program builders' [who] must simultaneously move between the resources that an institution offers, and yet also find freedom in public spaces and places, the virtual domain and other institutional infrastructures not typically associated with art. (Cachia, 2013: online)

It is similar to Graham and Cook's notion of the adjunct curator introduced earlier in the text. In her essay *The Collaborative Turn*, in the anthology *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, Lind suggests that methodologies of collaborative practice share structures with models found within activism where people from different fields of activity, convene to produce and disseminate knowledge (Lind, 2007:183). This idea is useful because it is suggestive of a collaborative curatorial practice that can overthrow established power structures.

Also useful for this research project is the notion Buerger and Noack (2007: 105) formulate of the exhibition as a medium or expressive gesture that opens up possibilities. They envisage the exhibition as an entity that does not end with itself. They propose that to be successfully critical, the curatorial process must achieve an aesthetic autonomy by becoming immersed within elements of political reality without being engulfed by them. They suggest that being critical is not sufficient to be world-changing, in order to achieve change on that level they insist that exhibitions must remain radically permeable, if not, *'it isn't possible for something to enter it and then exit without having changed, be that an audience, an idea, or an action.'* (Noack and Buerger, 2007:108)

Rogoff (2004) posits that curatorial practice provides an opportunity for a sense of collectivity to occur in the everyday experience of the audience participant to the affect that knowledge-producing points of cultural exchange occur.

Whilst Marchant is more concerned with the structural effects of curatorial processes suggesting that, *'the curatorial function lies in the organisation of the public sphere,'* (Marchant, 2007:164). Perhaps an impossible task; he insists that disruption is, in any case, necessary for a truly public sphere to exist. Borrowing

from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's notion of a democratic public⁹, he suggests that the essential criterion for a public sphere is antagonism:

'Only at the moment when a conflict breaks out does the public sphere emerge, with the breakdown of the consensus that is otherwise always silently presumed' (Marchant, 2007, 164).

Joseph Beuys too highlights how the conflict of processes including moments contained in different spheres of life can bear relevance for the formation of an artistic inquiry. He notes that insights from outside of focused research parameters can inform the research inquiry:

'Whether I am gardening, or talking to people...whether I'm teaching, or engaged in whichever field of work or activity I'm at home in, I must always have the presence of mind, the overview, the wider perspective, to perceive the overall context and set of forces.' (Beuys, 2004:12)

With the multiple roles of university researcher, curator, artist, woman and mother in mind, I began to perceive a gap in research for a different type of curator. I developed a notion of the 'curator as citizen' working alongside other citizens to generate discourse about socio-cultural conditions and to work together to make critical changes in social structures.

Smuggling – a Mode of Curatorial Practice

To smuggle something suggests a type of performative action, a movement of sorts between places, or maybe a journey of an object, person or idea, smuggled knowledge has its own histories of freedoms and censorship. This curatorial inquiry moves forward from a concept curator and writer, Irit Rogoff, (2006) introduces to curatorial research, the notion of 'smuggling as an embodied criticality', a mode of research I am proposing shares qualities with Halton's

⁹ See Chantal Mouffe 2007 *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*
<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

phronesis discussed later in this section of text, which is developed through an embodied form of practice and action that is identifiable by its unboundedness, lack of restrictions or pressures to adhere to finite resolution.

The research inquiry draws from Rogoff's smuggling to extend the idea that the curatorial researcher can operate outside the spaces of the mainstream museum or cultural institution; and like within online environments, can enable a suspension of the limiting rules and norms of everyday society. Rogoff's concept of smuggling is utilised in this inquiry as an analogy for a mode of research, practice and action that rethinks inherited systems of value of formal institutional critique:

Spatially... 'smuggling' is rife with possibilities as it helps us to unthink those binaries of inside the museum and outside in public space... it embodies a state of 'unboundedness'. (Rogoff: 2006)

Rogoff is concerned with a form of curatorial practice that embodies those performative and unstable state of criticality, understood as '*a form of ontology that is being advocated, a 'living things out' which has a hugely transformative power*', (Rogoff, 2008) this is a mode of practice where the researcher inhabits the different modalities of a process and gathers knowledge in performative action, as opposed to the more judgemental and concrete forms of knowledge associated with the notion of critique. It is here that smuggling shares similarities with the embodied nature of Halton's phronesis. For whilst Rogoff notes the importance of being able to employ critical judgment, she also demonstrates that;

'it operates by providing a series of sign posts and warnings but does not actualise people's inherent and often intuitive notions of how to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem rather than by analysing it.' (Rogoff, 2006)

Smuggling in Rogoff's terms is a useful mode of operating in the world that traces lines, '*of knowledge, of materials, of visibility and of partiality all of whose dynamic movements are essential for the conceptualisation of new cultural practices*'. (*ibid*) Rogoff explores the term as a form of embodiment;

'to see if 'smuggling' with all of its necessary 'shadow play' can be an active, political mode of 'being in the world' to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty. If it can be the mode of artists, curators and of criticality? (ibid)

My MA thesis (2011) established a similarly embodied and performative methodology for curatorial praxis. I will provide a brief summary of the key premise here. In *The Living Gesture and the Signifying Moment*, Eugene Halton traced the etymology of the term *knowledge* back to the Greek term *phronesis*, which is rendered into English as either 'prudence' or 'practical knowledge'. She revealed that the origins of the term had an earlier '*literal meaning for the area around the heart (phren), including the life-breathing lungs.*' (Halton:2004:90) Halton developed her analysis to further encompass the effects of the visceral body, acknowledging that, '*to say that the heart and lungs are associated with reasonableness seems odd to a modern person knowledgeable about the brain.*' (ibid) Importantly she redirected traditional thought of '*a conception of knowledge to one of awareness as a basis for reasonableness,*' (ibid) (the term reasonableness here denoted practical knowledge). Halton described an embodied form of knowledge, both tacit and intuitive, '*phronesis is the breathing, palpitating (phren heart area) bodily awareness of the situation, the spontaneous soul brought to bear on life.*' (ibid) This idea was key to the inquiry, I engaged in curatorial practice to generate criticality, through experiences I encountered in the field. I amended my action in response to the various interlocutors I engaged with, developing a bodily awareness of how curatorial action could impact the civic environment. It is a phenomenon that is linked with Judith Butler's repetitive notion of performed gesture producing one's knowledge of their identity. Butler presented the notion of performativity as '*the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame,*' (Butler:1990:33) Her theory asserted that individuals are not born with a gender but become gendered through a process that relied on the repetition of gendered acts so that, '*woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end.*' (ibid) Here we see the performative as a gestural device that can be applied to other practices of

being. In applying this theory to the process of curatorial research we see that performative curatorial research can be a process of becoming, subject to dialogic processes not dissimilar in construction to Butlers notion of performative gender. A process she described as '*an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.*' (ibid) Halton demonstrated the link to Butler by describing the process of phronesis (embodied knowledge awareness) as '*the living gesture bodied forth in the signifying moment, connecting us with...conditions out of which the human body evolved into its present condition.*' (ibid) This study asserts that in such embodied states of being we, as curatorial researchers, tacitly interpret our signifying environments in a process of phronesis. The inquiry reveals curatorial practice to be a performative, living gesture where practitioner insights are developed, shared and responded to as part of an embodied process, a performative criticality.

I expand upon the notion of phronesis to build a link to Rogoff's propositions about an embodied criticality to explore in praxis, how a curatorial form of smuggling, when employed within a community, creates a space for a transformative level of agency so that the researcher can operate as both scholar and active citizen working within his or her own immediate civic environment in such a way that evokes qualities of Baudelaire's Flaneur. The researcher inhabits society and acts as an observer of social and cultural structures yet avoids's the Flaneur's detached passivity instead harnessing something of de Certeau's experience with the other when practising place,

*'To practice space is thus to repeat the joyfull and silent experience of childhood, it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other'.
(de Certeau, 1984).*

By researching curatorial practices in the wider national and international field, and introducing those cultural discourses into a my own community, where I am able to reflect upon my identity as curator and the parametres of my role in that context in an active curatorial practice, to build speculation about the possibilities for new civic structures and in doing so create new opportunities for creative encounters between citizens and artists and members of the local authority. I came to understand that the curatorial smuggler is other and moves

towards the other as she operates in a dual mode of active citizenship and scholarly activism. The analogy of the flâneur is useful for demonstrating how smuggling might work, the methodology of wandering and observing within communities to gain insights into their societal structures from an immersed and sometimes clandestine position. Kevin Milburn demonstrates how the surreptitious activities of the flâneur differ from the flamboyant and hedonistic pursuits of the Dandy. In order for the flâneur to:

'carry out his vocation effectively the flâneur relies absolutely on anonymity. It is this clandestine nature that arguably enhances the flâneur's appeal for the social scientist: he becomes our eyes. He acquires empirical data by being there, by strolling, looking, hearing, smelling, feeling. It is the combination of these factors, allied to the eventual writing up of the data – often in the form of poetry, which defines a flâneur.' (Milburn, 2009)

These analogies are useful, demonstrating the difference of my approach of utilising curatorial inquiry to build new a civic structure and cultural resource that whilst having similar aims to projects developed within relational aesthetics and sometimes employing similar devices to promote conviviality and 'patiently re-stitch the social fabric,' (Bourriaud, 2002) I propose that my own practice could be depicted as a working through of a flâneur approach to develop a criticality within my practice, compared to the more extravagant, 'Dandy' approach employed by some artists and curators involved in relational aesthetics who created spectacular event based interventions in the biennale circuit. As the critical forum Radical Culture Research Collective note in their article *A Very Short Critique of Relational Aesthetics* (2007), practices of relational aesthetics as put forward by Bourriaud in the 1990s fell short of being effectively radical practices because they settled for containment within gallery based simulations. By ignoring the:

radical, macro-historical aim of a real world beyond capitalist relations... the disruptive utopian energies that do exist in relational art are managed and kept within tolerable limits: the social separations, stratifications and (self-)selections of the art system enact a liberalization – that is, a de-radicalization – of social desire. (Radical Culture Research Collective (RCRC), 2007)

I intended to avoid this pitfall by taking my work outside the gallery institution. One of my first experiments in curatorial smuggling occurred during March 2012 at Minshulls Garden Centre in Crewe. I had spoken to local authority officers from Cheshire East Council in Crewe about creating a pop up exhibition in Crewe town centre market place as an alternative to a commercial market stall. I wanted to create an art installation that would give me the opportunity to start building a discourse with people from the local community about contemporary art. I was told about the Youth Market being run by Steven Minshull for young people aged 14-30 years old. We had a conversation about our ideas for reaching new audiences for contemporary art. Youth Market was a success with over 14 stalls all run by young people. I set up the installation in Fig. 2 below. I had previously exhibited it in similar form at The Axis Arts Centre on the University campus so in this instance I felt I was beginning to smuggle my work into a more community-based location.

I was interested to see how visitor engagement changed in a different, less formal and institutional format. This exploratory installation led to some interesting conversations with market visitors who were generally intrigued about the work. I reached a new type of audience for my work and was able to share some of my research ideas with them. However, the encounters between us were very short and I was left dissatisfied with the level of engagement a market stall format could deliver. I decided to embark upon the process of finding a regular group of members of the public to work with to build a greater depth of discourse about my research. This led to my work in Northwich, the town in which I have lived for most of my life. I contacted artists I knew from my time studying at The Verdin Technical Schools (Mid Cheshire College) in Northwich and set up a similar installation in an empty shop (formerly Argos) in the town centre in a two day pop up art gallery/studio see fig. 6 and fig. 7 below. We advertised the event and invited people to visit. I found people spent longer discussing the work with me in this shop style environment which was more similar to an institutional context but located in a different type of civic environment.



Fig. 2 I am seen behind the art installation market stall I created at Minshulls Garden centre's Youth Market, March 2012. Image Credit: Ethan Eardley



Fig.3 and 4. These images show other stall holders with more traditional crafts and commercial goods.



Fig. 5 Mr Minshull helps set up my art installation at Youth Market, Minshulls Garden Centre

I was particularly contented with the opportunity to discuss contemporary art practices and my research inquiry with everyday members of the public outside of an academic or arts institutional framework such as Mr Minshull, Steven Minshull's father. He assisted me to set up the market stall art installation at the Youth Market at Minshulls Garden Centre and I was able to create this portrait of him in the process of doing so.



Fig. 6 and 7 My first pop up art exhibition in Northwich in former Argos storefront



I intended that the inquiry would generate discourse on taking steps towards community focused practice creating impact within a specific location on a small level. By collaborating with others who live in the community in the pursuit of the inquiry, by engaging them in discourse to build new meanings and

possibilities for the practice as it unfolded rather than by operating with pre-determined outcomes, this practice sought to avoid the critique of writers such as Nina Edge, (as we will see later in this chapter), who highlight the exploitative affects of 'superstar' curators operating in Biennale culture from an outsider position, through employing methodologies of the novelty event based exhibition practices common within those operating within relational aesthetics. I will demonstrate throughout this text how I developed my practice in response to Rogoff's notion of smuggling combined with exploration of elements of new institutionalism to become rooted in the community from both an insider and outsider position.

The notion smuggling is fraught with conflicts as it wrestles with the idea of harnessing the reins of cultural development in a surreptitious manner. For example, in my practice I found myself in an insider and outsider position that was mutable, it was not always clear whether I was the researcher or the researched. By utilising a methodology of smuggling to create a situation where the researcher enters an embedded position as a community volunteer offered a model that enables different types of discourse and knowledge exchange to occur. It is perhaps 'smuggled' into, the public arena through strategies of place making and exhibition forming and creating opportunities for discourse. Whilst from one viewpoint, the academic framework of the MPhil format is a solely authored document which deems it necessary to operate from an outsider position simultaneously, from another viewpoint, I was able to develop my practice as an insider, in collaboration with others.

The assumptions I am challenging by exploring new institutionalism are that knowledge production in contemporary art practices, must be largely confined within the campuses of the university or other highbrow cultural institutions. Contemporary art, is frequently generated and consumed within places of 'high art'. Boehm's writing about the emergence of the term Culture 3.0 as labeled by Pierre Luigi Sacco (2015) within the arts sector is useful here, a process;

characterized by the use of open platforms, democratic systems, ubiquitously available production tools and individuals constantly shifting and renegotiating their roles between producing and consuming content. (Boehm, 2016)

Boehm suggests that institutions are fixated on Culture 1.0, '*characterized by a distinction of high-brow vs low-brow, arts patronage, gatekeepers and value absorption*' (ibid). While both models are of interest to this research inquiry, the collective nature of Culture 3.0 bears most resemblance to the methodology of this study. Mainstream galleries, museums and university campuses still immersed within Culture 1.0, are most often frequented by specific demographics of people and this research was concerned with reaching and engaging collectively with a different demographic.¹⁰ Concerned with Culture 1.0 concepts such as arts patronage and gatekeepers but remodelling them through Culture 3.0 methodologies such as co-operative practice and support in kind. As Boehm writes:

our expanded Axis Arts Centre concept, with other 'seasons' that include touring work, student work and co-production and co-curation models, we have developed supporting structures more closely aligned to Culture 3.0, whilst still mediating Culture 1.0 content. (Boehm, 2016)

The methodology operated through a Culture 3.0 approach, by co-producing the work with a community of others, it raised questions about who could be the gatekeepers of culture whilst I operated from inside the study as a fellow collaborator and member of the community. I intended to avoid the potentially exploitative affects of some engaged art practices. Boehm notes that in this expanded format for scholarly practice:

¹⁰ See http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/arts_audience_insight_2011.pdf for further information. This research shows that the highest levels of arts engagement are to be found within the segments 'Urban Arts Eclectic' and 'Traditional Culture Vultures' whereas my own research practice engaged more with the segment they termed 'Mid Life Hobbyists', 'Mature Explorers', 'Retired Arts and Crafts' and 'Family and Community Focused' with some engagement with the segment 'Older and Homebound'.

More often than not, there are multiple communities working together to co-curate, and then co-produce a creative event, and in true Culture 3.0 form, it might be difficult to differentiate here between the creator and the consumer, or where the work begins and when it stops. (Boehm, 2016)

Nina Edge touches on this in her article *Pass the Parcel: Art, Agency, Culture and Community*, (2016) where she asks;

Can the essentially exploitative dynamic of socially engaged art, dropped in like food parcels, be disputed in those (albeit rare) cases where artists are actually members of communities? The notion that communities might produce, co-opt or integrate artists comes as no surprise to artists who are the interfacing workers, the lubricant between social enterprises, public authorities and art institutions - all of whom are keen to trumpet how much work they do 'in the community' (Edge 2016)

As this study will show, it is my proposition that by a process of curatorial smuggling, the scholarly activist can generate positive impact in everyday communities by employing the approach of 'Curating Knowledge' as proposed by Linden (2012).¹¹ Linden's *Curating Knowledge* was a series of practice as research artist residencies programmed within the Axis Art Centre's, Axis Open Space. The largely students and academics visitors to the Curating Knowledge events were encouraged to interact with the artists during the process of the residency in a dialogic encounter with the artist and work. Each residency had an associated academic seminar where the artists gave a talk with questions and answers to excavated the knowledge created through the process of the residency. My initial research proposal was to also work in the AOS to create new audiences for such work but I soon realised I would be in danger of replicating Linden's project. Instead I chose to draw from her model and extend the inquiry through new institutionalism in a community located praxis. By locating my own curatorial inquiry in a less formal institutional space, I wanted

¹¹ See The *Curating Knowledge* Project Linden, J (2012 and <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=34477> for more on this.

to explore *Curating Knowledge* in a more public realm, where contemporary practices could be developed, consumed and disseminated, within local, everyday communities who could claim ownership over the projects and put knowledge gained into direct action, ultimately there would be a possibility of gaining social power and mobility. In doing so, by smuggling myself as curator/citizen/researcher into a community our work in Northwich signaled a turning inside out of the established Culture 1.0 frameworks for the organisation, display, reception and dissemination of contemporary art practices and moved towards a position of New Institutionalism.

In evaluation of the development of this inquiry it became clear there were challenges in developing a concept of smuggling, as a performative, embodied curatorial research methodology. To work through a process of criticality meant being immersed within an inchoate journey of sorts. The academic nature of the study gave it a specific temporal framework yet to design too far ahead would pre-determine my destination and resist the opportunity to be responsive to developments in the territory being explored. The beginning of the project led to false starts, before clear routes were established and before criticality was able to emerge there were exploratory projects like youth market at Minshulls garden centre cited earlier, that led in directions that were not suitable for an extended study.

Each exploration led to insights and was an incremental part of the process progression. Eventually out of the mix, criticality began to emerge. The process allowed me to realise that initially I wasn't embedded deeply enough within the communities I was working with to create an engaged response where discourse about contemporary art and civic structures could be interrogated. In projects such as *Unexpected Sites* (see appendix 2) I was a visitor and wasn't an embedded member of the community and it was obvious I was an outsider, (a member of the University looking in, rather than a genuine member of their community) I was an imposter of sorts. An important insight I discovered was that to be effective, a curatorial smuggler must be an integrated part of the community.

My progress in the first year had been widespread as I explored the different

networks of communities I could engage and make connections with in order to create work. In Chapter 3: Praxical Case Study I demonstrate how the practitioner insights developed in the early part of the study gave me the direction to seek out a group of community members within my own immediate community where I live in Northwich so that from the outset of the next stage of the process I could explore new institutionalism and develop more understandings about the notion of curatorial smuggling while working from a dual insider/outsider position of artist/scholar and active citizen.

Chapter 1: Introduction to contextual frameworks

This chapter introduces critical territories that inform my engagement with this ongoing project. Whilst the next chapter addresses each of these ideas more directly, the writing here illustrates their significance as starting points; catalysts and provocations for what I conceive of as a critical curatorial practice. The contextualizing framework considers three key discourses: Arts and Institutions, The Arts and The People and The Artist-Curator as Protagonist.

The Arts and the Institution

This inquiry has been informed by various discourses of ‘new institutionalism’ within the arts. Claire Doherty defined new institutionalism as:

The buzzword of current European curatorial discourse. A term poached from social science, it classifies effectively a field of curatorial practice, institutional reform and critical debate concerned with the transformation of art institutions from within. (Doherty, 2004)

In *Thinking about Exhibitions*, editors Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne suggest that exhibitions are the key medium through which art becomes known becoming the:

Primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions – especially exhibitions of contemporary art – establish and administer the cultural meanings of art (Greenberg et al, 1996: 2).

The passages cited above are useful for this inquiry as they illustrate the wide range of functions and transformative potential of institutions and the contemporary art exhibition format. I move forward from Greenberg's *et al* assertions to formulate the premise in this inquiry that the institutions that we attend, that are provided for us within our communities, or that we self-build and are community-led, create frameworks that we use to establish cultural meanings. Where such cultural infrastructure is missing from a community the curatorial researcher can employ new institutional strategies of public dialogue and civic action in exploration of the nature and possibilities for implementing new social-political frameworks that hold significance for the communities that utilise them. Galleries, museums and university housed arts centres can often access public funding streams to devote whole programmes to widening access for different types of communities; yet these types of institutions, often located in cities, may still be seen to have barriers (imaginary or real) that prevent many potential users from accessing them.¹²

Exhibitions of contemporary art are most often produced and consumed within these types of institutions and many non-regular visitors may consider them to be elitist. It is for this reason then, that my curatorial practice is not only concerned with the work of art and the processes of its production, but also its dissemination mediation and contexts of consumption.

¹² This article published by Media Diversified, Amadosun (2013) '*Black people don't go to galleries*' – *The reproduction of taste and cultural value*' begins to explore this territory with regards to Bourdieu's notions of social fields and ontological complicity and his concept of 'hysteresis' used to describe the displacement effect of 'feeling like a fish out of water'.

The inquiry has explored the wider discourses of new institutionalism to develop understandings of how such methodologies can operate outside of established arts world frameworks, of the academy or metropolitan contemporary art gallery to develop and impact within semi-rural communities. Thus reaching new audiences through a critical curatorial practice, more often located in a city based sphere of contemporary arts. Praxis here, was influenced by discourses of new institutionalism and Rogoff's writing on embodied criticality and institutional critique¹³ were a helpful starting point due to their attention to turning the academy inside out and the consideration of knowledge production as occurring in what I designate as an embedded performativity. Rogoff writes that learning in her practice, occurs in situations or sites that look away from direct critique of the institution, instead creating spaces for experimentation and exploration, interestingly by this opening up of the institution she focused on two processes she termed, 'potentiality' ... *'it must always include within it an element of fallibility—the possibility that acting will end in failure.'* (Rogoff, 2006) and actualization... *'which implies that certain meanings and possibilities embedded within objects, situations, actors, and spaces carry a potential to be "liberated,"'* (ibid) This creates a complex embedded field where *'social processes, bodies of learning, individual subjectivities cannot be separated and distinguished from one another.'* (Rogoff, 2008)

In Europe during the late 1990s institutional practices underwent a paradigm shift perpetuated in part by the rise of Biennale culture and an event based funding climate. Institutions moved from white cube exhibition formats, with an object-centered focus to more sociopolitical, artist development and visitor-centered operations, as demonstrated by curators such as Nicolas Bourriaud,

¹³ See, Rogoff, *Turning* (2006) 'Our initial question concerned whether an idea of an "academy" (as a moment of learning within the safe space of an academic institution) was a metaphor for a moment of speculation, expansion, and reflexivity without the constant demand for proven results. If this was a space of experimentation and exploration, then how might we extract these vital principles and apply them to the rest of our lives? How might we also perhaps apply them to our institutions? Born of a belief that the institutions we inhabit can potentially be so much more than they are, these questions ask how the museum, the university, the art school, can surpass their current functions.'

Maria Lind, and Charles Esche. Kolb and Flückiger in their article *New Institutionalism Revisited* described this type of programming described as:

Conceived as a social project and operated alongside discursive events, film programs, radio and TV shows, integrated libraries and book shops as well as journals, reading groups, online displays, invitation cards, posters and residencies. The uses of these formats remained adaptable and open to change: production, presentation and reception/criticism were not successive and separate activities; they happened simultaneously and frequently intersected (Kolb and Flückiger, 2014:6)

Esche suggests that his initial interest in employing strategies of new institutional practice, was informed by a quest to understand the emancipatory potential of a more democratic approach to community engagement, *'in terms of art as a potential way in which the reimagining of the world could take place.'* (Esche cited in Kolb and Flückiger, 2013:24) He perceived the opportunity to remodel the institution into a device to question if it could be possible *'to install other forms of democracy than the ones we had?'* (ibid) Moving from a role in charge of exhibitions at Scotland's *Tramway* in the late 1990s to directorship of *Rooseum*, Malmo in Sweden enabled Esche greater flexibility to influence the restructuring and function of the whole institution.

In doing so, *Rooseum* became a site for knowledge production. By working with the local University to create new programmes and supporting artist residencies so that the *Rooseum* programming became the catalyst for developing forums, new archives and more democratic working practices. (Esche cited in Kolb and Flückiger, 2013:24-25)

In an article for the art publication *Frieze*, critic Alex Farquharson (2006) identified many aspects of new institutionalism:

Usually political, sometimes activist, well networked at a local and international level, collaborative as opposed to hierarchical, self-organized rather than instrumentalized, flexible and quick on their feet. (Farquharson, 2006:online)

A critique of some new institutional practices is that the focus on innovative curatorial frameworks may overshadow the work of the artists. This would create an environment or 'Gesamtkunstwerk' where the work of artists is subsumed - authored instead by the 'superstar' curator. This is something that my own curatorial practice aimed to resist. Although being an academic inquiry in part and this complementary writing is solely authored, the praxis has been participatory. The intention has been to create context sensitive situations alongside local collaborators who were fully involved in decision-making and where artists retained authorship of their works. The premise utilised new institutional strategies with fellow citizens to restructure the possibilities for the use of public social spaces in our own local environment in-order to echo Esche's intentions of creating a better and more democratic society.

Gregory Sholette suggests that in addition to seeking new ways to account for collective artistic authorship, art practices must consider how the dematerialisation of artistic practices might impact forms of creative engagement, so that we might rethink our institutions. (Sholette, 2011:4) In line with this, Sholette advocates for scholarly practices that examine forms of production and distribution '*while simultaneously challenging the emerging rhetoric of artistic administration as evinced by the de-politicized use of the term cultural capital.*' (ibid) He contends that in doing so, collectivism and the possibility of worker autonomy, might emerge to pose a potential threat to the hegemony of centralized, capitalist management. (ibid)

In *Exhibition Rhetorics* (1996) a timely essay, written as the first wave of new institutionalism was emerging, Bruce Ferguson intimated that the exhibition is the 'speech act' of the institution. The voices heard in the exhibition are those of the institution rather than of the artists whose artworks are utilised to filter the voice of the institution. Ferguson imagined that if a more open and questioning institutional voice was employed then opportunity for an authentic dialogue with visitors might occur. It could be argued that by changing the institution from the inside, curatorial practitioners such as Esche were able to establish such open approaches with the resulting situation that they were able to

intervene in hegemonic institutional narratives to create work more democratically.

The Arts and The People

The Report of The Community Arts Working Party (1974) compiled by Harold Baldry, was commissioned to establish the value of community arts and suggested that community artists are distinguishable not by the techniques they utilize, rather, by their personal view towards the place of their activities in the life of society. The report suggested that a community practitioner's foremost imperative must be their relationship to and impact on a specific community.

Desirable factors for good practice included; an awareness of local peoples' creative powers, ensuring facilities were readily available in order that these abilities can be utilised, and an intention to enrich existence by widening and deepening the sensibilities of the community in which they work. (Kelly, 1984:16). Forty years later Baldry's report still finds some resonance for me. In preparing its own *modus operandi*, this study has considered such factors, using them as a template for good practice so that the impact of the work has been attentive to both the contexts and the communities.

In February 2011, to coincide with the second annual State of the Arts conference, the RSA published a document, *Arts Funding, Austerity and the Big Society, Remaking the Case for the Arts?* It addressed priorities for the arts in times of austerity and asked a range of questions:

What is our vision for the long term? What imaginative and practical approaches are needed to sustain the arts through this period? What new opportunities are there to deepen the value of the arts to individuals, to society and to the economy? (Knell and Taylor, 2011:3)

Whilst the report acknowledged that The RSA Commission on 2020 Public Services encouraged public expenditure to be assessed in terms of instrumental measurement in the form of a '*social productivity test*': *whether it builds individual and community engagement, resilience and reciprocity*'. (Knell and Taylor, 2011:7) It also highlighted discourse advocating the view that instrumental effects of the arts may weaken their power and potential.¹⁴

The dichotomy between the two points of view was something that I tried to balance in my approach to gathering investment, (in time and engagement as well as in monetary terms), in provision of the visual arts in Northwich. Whilst I was extremely concerned that our work had positive community and economic impact, I was particularly keen to raise levels of artistic merit and challenge audiences by inviting contemporary artists into the town to remodel perceptions about the type of work appropriate to a 'local' context. Lucy Lippard is helpful here; she writes extensively about artist's relationship to place in her text *The Lure of the Local*:

As envisionaries, artists...work against the dominant cultures rapacious view of nature, reinstate the mythical and cultural dimensions of public experience, and at the same time become conscious of the ideological relationships and historical constructions of place. The dialectic between space and change can provide the kind of no-man's-land where artists thrive'. (Lippard, 1997:19)

Artist, Jane Fairhurst, became interesting to my study as she undertook a project in her own local context, the town centre of Skelmersdale, in Northern England. This is a town created in the spirit of utopian ideals and Fairhurst's project revealed that unfortunately it had become considered by many as a 'no mans land' of sorts due its unpopular modernist architecture and because it was felt that a sense of displacement had been experienced by people relocated there due to the town's geographical isolation and lack of public transport links. After discussing the shared interests in our projects, I invited Fairhurst to produce an

¹⁴ See McCarthy, K.F. et al (2004). *Gifts of the Muse: Reforming the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*. RAND Corporation; Holden, J. (2004). *Capturing Cultural Value*. Demos.

exhibition of sculptural works titled, *Small Mythologies of The New Era* for our pop up art gallery. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

There is a complexity to the term 'local' – the notion is constantly in flux as different members of the public influence its construction and the idea is perceived differently by each person depending on their own personal histories. The local in this study refers to Northwich in Cheshire, a town built around the salt industry; still existing long after that industry has declined. Where independent shops have been closing and large high-street names such as Odeon and Asda have been sought to regenerate the town.¹⁵ It could be argued that spending public money on the arts in the current economic climate is superfluous, and should be reserved for times of affluence. The types of art generally shown in Northwich could be deemed 'leisure art' made for the enjoyment of the maker. These works are most usually made in a modern tradition of painting and sculpture and oil and watercolour paintings are popularly received. Typically these works are shown in self-organized exhibitions at the village halls where artist groups who meet, and learn from one another. The work is for most likely for sale and later provides individual enjoyment, purchased to decorate people's homes. 'Community arts' in a town such as Northwich are often perceived as entertainment devices for the young or elderly and are perhaps considered as a sign of austerity, best reserved for social cohesion, to engage youths in more deprived areas. It is my premise that community arts in Northwich should manifest at it's centre to be accessible by all, in order that contemporary manifestations of art may act discursively in public space and challenge audiences to a greater extent than leisure art does. As Lippard writes such contemporary artistic practices may operate in a local context to:

Expose the social agendas that have formed the land, bring out multiple readings of places that mean different things to different people at different times rather than merely reflecting some of their

¹⁵ See http://www.weavervalley.org.uk/?page_id=2834 and <http://northwichriverside.co.uk/barons-quay/> for information about planning schemes in Northwich

beauty back into the marketplace or the living room. (Lippard, 1997:19)

This concern was echoed in the wider North West region at the *Manchester Salon* discussion ‘*Valuing the arts in an age of austerity*’ (June, 2011:online) where speakers asked important questions about the solutions offered in the RSA arts funding and austerity document cited earlier in the text. A central concern was that if we allow art to be instrumental it loses its power to disturb. A particular passage from the online recording of the discussion resonated with my own thoughts on the subject:

If we start to talk about art in its ability to regenerate; communities, economies, peoples lives; what happens to art that doesn't meet those criteria? Is that the kind off limits? Maybe we just don't talk about it anymore, maybe artists don't do that type of art anymore because it doesn't fit into the funding schemes that value regenerate art.
(Kennedy et al, 2011)

This struck a chord, I wanted to ensure that exhibition programming in my own research inquiry was not utilised only for ameliorative effect. I was interested to expand my own and other people's ideas about what community arts could be and was interested to explore possibilities for the structures behind the means of display as much as the types of work.

Claire Bishop's argument that the best collaborative practices must function in terms other than those focused on their ameliorative effects resonated with me. (Bishop, 2010) In an interview with Jennifer Roche, Bishop raised her concerns that instrumental arts funding policies implemented with New Labour regime in the UK had exploited the notion of social inclusion as a:

Cost-effective way of justifying public spending on the arts while diverting attention away from the structural causes of decreased social participation, which are political and economic (welfare, transport, education, healthcare, etc.). (Bishop cited by Roache, 2010:online)

The resounding implications of this had currency within my own research inquiry, as I was moving forward with the premise that my interventions might address a lack of cultural infrastructure.

Bishop warns that critical practices must also question the terms of these ameliorative assumptions:

In this context it is crucial for art practices to tread a careful line between social intervention and autonomy, since demonstrable outcomes are rapidly co-opted by the state. (Bishop cited by Roache, 2010:online)

Another interesting point in the Manchester Salon discussion questioned arts funding bodies social imperative and referred to restrictions on autonomy:

'Goebbels banned degenerate art, we seem to live in a world in which the arts council only want to fund regenerate art, I just think there's some food for thought in that' (Kennedy et al, 2011: audio recording)

Whilst this comparison may seem extreme, it highlights the level of wariness felt towards the implications for autonomy inferred by such guidelines. The RSA document cites Throsby (2010) to illustrate two sides of the arts value argument and a possible way through the dilemma:

On the one hand, political pragmatists seeking to bring the arts into a broader public policy discourse will be accused of philistinism, while on the other side, those arguing for a return to the intrinsic or absolute values of culture will be labeled elitist and self-serving. In a rational world neither side should hold sway; rather in this area, as elsewhere, a sensible way forward would seem to rest on recognition of the multiple dimensions of artistic experience. (Throsby, 2010:63)

Maintaining a balance between adapting artistic intention to suit funding criteria and maintain high standards of artistic quality and autonomy continues to be the challenge for publicly funded artists and institutions and is something I grapple with repeatedly within my own praxis.

The Artist-Curator as Protagonist

Wernli Saitô provides a brief interpretation of socially engaged, protagonist art practices:

Socially engaged art can be viewed as a form of constructive anthropological research because it aims to create new connections; and if such action-based art can sustain new relationships, it might generate small-scale models for alternative social arrangements and value exchanges. (Wernli Saitô, 2006)

At the very early stages of the research inquiry I visited the *Curating Degree Zero Archive* in Zurich.¹⁶ This is a large archive of curatorial documentation containing useful case studies of artists working in socially engaged, activist contemporary art practices.



Fig. 8 Image of the Curating Degree Zero Archive temporarily housed within Curator, Barnaby Drabble's Zurich based Atelier

¹⁶ The Curating Degree Archive project was established 'to research, present and discuss changes in the practice of freelance curators, artist-curators, new-media curators and curatorial collaborations. Beginning in 1998 with a three-day symposium and an ensuing publication, the project went on to build an expanding archive about these practices. Between 2003 and 2008 the archive toured to 17 venues, where it was displayed, used and accompanied by a programme of live events and discussions.' (Richter & Drabble (2003-8) <http://www.curatingdegreezero.org/>)

Whilst in Zurich I spoke to activists involved in the Occupy movement about their ideas about occupying institutional space such as banks¹⁷ and university campuses. Some of their ideas resonated with my own notions about citizens rights to create new structures in our own communities and I shared with them information about the community right to bid in the UK that I had learnt about in a meeting with the Locality in Northwich. It was interesting to note that my own approach to re-utilising authority owned space differed from the Occupy stance of direct action taken without consent. My approach of negotiating with the local authority to rethink the use of their empty properties closely aligned to new institutional strategies of working alongside the institution to create discourse about how the institution might be remodeled rather than by working against it.



Fig 9. Photograph I took of an Occupy Banner in Zurich

¹⁷ For more on Occupy in Zurich see https://www.nzz.ch/occupy_paradeplatz_kreativer_protest_im_zuercher_bankenviertel-1.13004352

I learnt more about the work of artists such as Jeanne Van Heeswijck and Tania Bruguera, who is described by Rose Lee Goldberg as having, '*an awareness of living in an animated political matrix, of consequences being attached to actions...[providing] the underlying ethical compass*', (Goldberg, 2005) to her work.

I will look at both artists' work in greater detail in Chapter 2. Most of the examples of other practitioner's work that I found in the archive, were centered in city based environments in the wider European context and I recognised a gap for research addressing a semi-rural context in the United Kingdom.

Socially engaged arts criticism often focuses on discourses of agency and ethics.¹⁸ Simon Duncan suggests that the notion of agency is relational, as power is contingent to social relationships with other people and institutions that have power to affect:

Both formally and informally, and both individually and collectively. As Mary Douglas (1987) famously put it, institutions 'think' on our behalf. In so doing social institutions (the accepted ways of thinking and doing) also constrain us, often invisibly. (Duncan, 2013:3.5)

Carol Duncan who writes about ritual behaviour inherent in public art museums. She suggests that institutions and actors, must be aware that in their protagonist role they wield:

Control [of] the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community. Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual – those who are most able to respond to its various cues. (Duncan, 1995: 6)

The researcher employing new institutional strategies can function in a way that rethinks terms of engagement creating opportunities to flatten institutional

¹⁸ For further reading on this matter See Miwon Kwon, (2002) *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Grant Kester, (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Claire Bishop, (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*.

hierarchies so that members of the public have increased control over the social-political sphere including the methods of production and consumption of contemporary art. Discourses about opening up the institution were forming during the 1990's, as Duncan wrote in 1995; institutions must open up questions about:

Whose identities (social, sexual, racial etc.) the...[institution] ritual most fully confirms...what we see and do not see in...[institutions] – and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it – is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines identity.' (ibid)

The premise explored in this inquiry then, is that my curatorial practice is similarly unbounded, utilising the once normative environment of an empty shop in a high street location to transgress consumer expectation, resulting in the formation of a counter-public form of cultural space. By appropriating the use of local authority owned empty shops and creating community-run art galleries and by showing contemporary, scholarly art instead of only showing the work of painters and ceramicists in local artist groups in the modern or traditional art style, the project can be seen to upturn social convention, smuggle new ideas and behaviour directly into a semi-rural town centre.

In meetings and conversations with my fellow collaborators, local authority officials and members of the public we would discuss case studies from elsewhere in the North West's thriving contemporary world such as the 2up 2down¹⁹ in Liverpool co-founded by Jeanne Van Heeswijck initially for The Liverpool Biennial and later self-managed by the local community. Also Wolstenholme Contemporary Space, the art studio group in Liverpool I belonged to that had formerly been an artists squat and had gone on to negotiate terms with the landlord. I spoke about strategies for community involvement and outreach work at The Black-E in Liverpool where I had previously worked as Duty Manager, and Art Gene in Barrow who have an interesting contemporary

¹⁹ See the project website here <http://www.2up2down.org.uk/>

arts development programme. By engaging with others in a discursive approach I feel that I was able to imbibe the belief that we could create a counter-public space in a local, semi-rural location that was as contemporary and rigorously focused towards, and led by the local community in Northwich as the city-based examples cited above.

My own protagonist role developed from these discourses; in addition to working with artists, my intention in this inquiry could be seen to facilitate collaborative exchanges to both expand my knowledge as a creative researcher and also impact upon my local cultural frameworks. Having been recently developed into a televised series, *The Portas Review* was a useful point of access here, because residents of Northwich were familiar with the idea that we needed to work together to improve our high street. Creating alternative spaces for different types of cultural dialogue from empty shops seemed an achievable possibility. I began to conceptualise the empty shop gallery as a form of counterpublic space, as it was formed to directly address the gap in cultural infrastructure that emerged as the local authority arts team became more centralized in Chester, further away from the Vale Royal area. The Vale Royal Borough arts officer was lost when the non-metropolitan district of Vale Royal ceased to exist and was instead replaced by the non metropolitan, unitary authority of Cheshire West and Chester. A support scheme for small grants for arts organisations in the borough was abolished at this time and through conversations with many local artists I began to see that there was an appetite for arts in Northwich.

I began to develop a notion that my role as an artist-curator-scholar could introduce contemporary artworks into the mix so that new types of audience could gather in some abandoned spaces in the town centre. The spirit of civic action and make do and mend, was something that resonated with local citizens, council officials and artists alike. It was useful to be able to show that by utilising a 'do it yourself' approach we could, '*invest in and create social capital in the heart of our communities [so that]...the economic capital will follow.*' (Portas,

2011:3) This ethos was demonstrated in the type of work I programmed in the pop up gallery space as we shall see in the section discussing Fairhurst's *Small Mythologies For The New Era*.

So the 'artist-curator as protagonist' can be seen as a smuggler, employing a networked form of curatorial engagement that inhabits public consciousness through a collaborative network of encounters and artistic interventions that seep through the fabric of society, revealing nodes of cultural difference and interruption and creates platforms for emergent aspects of culture to be made explicit within the public realm. My praxis posits that the notion of smuggling, in curatorial terms, signifies a transfer of cultural information, learning from directly within a community about their needs and sharing knowledge gained from scholarly pursuits to effect curatorial action that operates in a sphere of criticality, being responsive to the frameworks found and that has the ability to restructure given frameworks through an embodied form of performativity.²⁰ An example of this happening within my practice occurred when I shared information gained from my attendance at an international conference in Austria with my colleagues in Northwich.

Chapter 2: Critical Territories

New institutionalism

The research led me to explore the term new institutionalism to discern a category of academically driven curatorial practice that operates in a reflexive, innovative position working both inside and outside of institutional

²⁰ 'As conceptual models of the public sphere have moved toward multiplicity, 'counterpublic' has emerged as a critical term to signify that some publics develop not simply as one among a constellation of discursive entities, but as explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants.' Asen, R (2000) 'Seeking the 'Counter' in Counterpublics' *Communication Theory* 10:4 p.424-446

frameworks. The term is particularly relevant for my own praxis as I operate at the interstice of academic and community-based professional research practices.

Claire Doherty suggests that new institutional approaches to the production and consumption of contemporary art may counteract institutional hegemony by remaining open to change. Such methodologies are characterized by:

[The] rhetoric of the temporary - transient encounters, states of flux and open-endedness. It embraces a dominant strand of contemporary art practice - namely that which employs dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption. (Doherty, 2004: online)

Doherty suggests that new institutionalism is further characterized by being self-reflexive in its processes and by providing new understandings about what the arts institution stands for and how it operates. Institutions operating within this frame are self-critical and constantly reframe their engagement with artists and audiences. They modify internal and external structures in negotiation with their service users. Doherty suggests that new institutionalism demands a shift in modality whereby programming staff become more integrated across internal departments, from education teams, public talk programmers and exhibition teams etc. but that there is also an external shift in audience behaviour, *'back and forth between reception and participation'* (Doherty, 2:2004).

Charles Esche suggested that new institutions must be multifunctional public spaces for experimentation²¹ that must remain grounded in their locality. This is a task that, *'requires hospitality above all, but also recognition of the difficulty of asking for people's time and energy in our hyperactive society.'* (Esche, 2004: 4) In

²¹ 'Now, the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore the institutions to foster it have to be part community centre, part-laboratory and part-academy, with less need for the established showroom function' (Esche, 2004:2)

my own curatorial practice I try and reveal production processes to our community of users by programming public seminars so that dialogues about the work and its context. As Esche states:

It is not good enough to devise a good international programme in isolation; instead what we do must address the separate micro-communities that make up the city. (ibid)

Criticism of new institutionalism echoes that of relational aesthetics in that much of the published discourse investigates changes of approach at the ideological and structural level of the institution. The focus of critique unpacks format whilst seemingly ignoring content. The actual subject matter of work produced within such institutions is often overlooked in favour of the format of processes and critiques about the ethics of consumption.²² In an issue of the online curatorial journal, *On-Curating*, titled '*New Institutionalism*', curatorial researchers Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger reflect on their recent research into new institutional practices and suggest that the precariousness of event based, temporary contracts were devastating for the new institutional worker, for whilst the conditions enabled agency for individual actors within the institution, the effects of a lack of economic stability led to changes in behaviour and to a lack of critical distance where workers have to mediate action '*in the spaces between self-actualization and institutional constraint*' (Kolb and Flückiger, 2013:18). They also suggest that much new institutional discourse was recorded in exhibition catalogues and other documentation authored by curators to the effect that the history of practice was recorded in a voice where curatorial intention and interpretation amalgamated and was thus inscribed with a rhetoric of aspirant reform, propaganda which did not always manifest in tangible outcomes. (Kolb and Flückiger, 2013)

²² See Bishop, C (2004) *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, October MIT Press for criticism of Relational Aesthetics and for the relationship between Relational Aesthetics and New Institutionalism see *Relational Aesthetics and New Institutionalism*
http://artandpeople.wordpress.com/masters-research/ra-and-ni/#_ftn16

Similarly, Sally Tallant cautions that working at the interstice of institutional agendas leads to integrated programming but can also lead to tokenism with an increasing number of art projects purporting to be engaged in social science research where in fact they act merely for spectacular or symbolic effect where:

The research results (or works of art) are, more often than not, neither up to scratch academically nor do they imbue the information with any new artistic significance. They are forms of either pop information, inaccessible specialist data or, sadly, sensationalism.
(Tallant, 2009:3)

She calls for a tightening of parameters, to analyse and evaluate the new frameworks and modes of engagement advocated by new institutionalism in order to raise questions of how this work should be evaluated.

Doherty's text *The Institution is Dead! Long Live The Institution!* (2004) highlights the self-reflexivity of new institutional practices citing a list of questions formulated by Curator Jens Hoffman:

What possibilities does an institution have in shaping an understanding of culture, art and politics? What is its impact on a local community? What does the public expect from an art institution? Why should anybody care? (Hoffman cited in Doherty 2004:2)

Over the course of the research inquiry I continually responded to Hoffman's questions by formulating my own self-reflexive questions as counterpoints for a more critical research practice.

I was also influenced in my decision making by the many external dialogues I shared with other curatorial practitioners, conversations with other arts professionals I met on study visits to other cultural institutions, researchers and my collaborators in community practice and as I absorbed readings undertaken in traditional academic research.

For example I responded with reflections such as - What does new institutionalism mean for me as a curatorial researcher working in Northwich outside of an established 'art world' context? How can I bridge the gap between the work happening in Northwich and my work in a university based context in

my role as academic researcher? What are the ethical concerns of operating in an insider/outsider position as artist-curator/citizen/researcher? How can I function democratically with collaborators, artist and audiences in Northwich to avoid risks of instrumentalisation in favour of my own research interests and progression? When working as part of a democratic and collaborative group in a community context, how do I retain an autonomous research practice and also maintain an ethical position that considers the needs of the community group and my obligations to academia when their aims and my own diverge? Working through these questions in the course of the research inquiry in a process of criticality meant that I operated in a responsive manner to communities I was immersed within. It was necessary at times to amend my intentions for the inquiry as I asked my collaborators what they expected of the practice at regular meetings and negotiated with them before embarking on any direction I wanted shape the project towards. This habit revealed itself to be good practice because when we had differences in opinion about potential exhibition plans for example, the fact that I shared power over the decision making, opened up the opportunity for dialogue and debate internally between us directors at a greater level than if I had just programmed whatever I wanted to. In this way I was able to defend my choices, and open up areas of inquiry to greater understanding within the team.

Artist-Curators as Smugglers: Socially Engaged Art

This section of the text operates to demonstrate how artists working in the wider international and national creative sector have been influential to the development of my research inquiry. Tania Bruguera and Jeanne van Heeswijck are two artist-curators whose work I first read about during my study visit to Zurich to research the Curating Degree Zero archive then housed within Curator Barnaby Drabble's atelier. I later visited Tania Bruguera's project Immigrant Movement International in Queens, New York and Jeanne van Heeswijck's project Home Baked, initially set up as part of Liverpool Biennial in order to gain first hand experience of their work and to open up discourse with staff members

working within the projects. I shared my experiences of these projects with members of my own community in Northwich in order to raise awareness of creative practices of this nature and raise aspirations for what we could achieve in Northwich within our own work.

Tania Bruguera

Artist Tania Bruguera, a Cuban immigrant living and working in Corona, Queens, is an artist who could be seen to utilize the curatorial device of smuggling to create new communities of collaborators. In a recent project of socially engaged practice she works as an adjunct artist-curator working in partnership with Queens Museum, and also in collaboration with communities within the specific context of the immigrant population of Queens. The five-year project is titled, *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI) and it has begun to affect social and political change in Queens by merging art with activism she creates a platform for sharing political and creative knowledge with individuals, usually from the immigrant community, regardless of their legal status.

Bruguera utilises principles of new institutionalism and curatorial smuggling by operating IMI headquarters from a former shop in the heart of Queens, very close by to the tube station. She has implemented a community-based institution outside of the Queens Museum context whilst maintaining a partnership with the museum and many other institutional collaborators.²³ IMI does not create representative aestheticisation of political concerns by programming political art in gallery-based exhibitions.

Instead, they create an active counter-public programme of events such as, '*Re-Conceptualizing the 21st Century (Im)Migrant*', a symposium that gathered together many immigrants of all spheres of life, politicians, activists, academics,

²³ See <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/partners-and-collaborators/> for a complete list of collaborators

and members of the *IMI* community, to discuss matters relating to immigration. The culmination of the symposium was a mission statement that was published to the *IMI* website. The statement was clear, *IMI* operates as a think tank for the advancement of immigrant's role in society, it is a lab practicing activist tactics for political dialogue, it is an educational platform creating alternative economies based on reciprocity over monetary values.²⁴ The programme at *IMI* is workshop, campaign and event based directly involving individuals which exposes the media, and in direct consequence, the art world to real life socio-political situations.

Bruguera is engaging in a practice she terms, *Behaviour* or *Useful* art, living on minimum wage, working with local community organisations and shadowing government officials in order to gain a greater depth of insight into other immigrant experiences in her immediate local context. However, in an interview for the art magazine *Frieze*, interviewer Noble (2012) introduces the premise that Bruguera as an internationally renowned artist, is not placed in her local context as an equal to other immigrants, rather her privileged position allows a freedom in the actions she is able to make to effect change.²⁵

Bruguera responded to the provocation by asserting that she does not necessarily have immediate access to the vast economies of the art world by simple default of being involved with it. Her model of *Behaviour* art, like many live, process led or ephemeral arts, is not easily assimilated in the market due to the difficulties in producing concrete manifestations for collectors to purchase. The impact of working in a format that remodels institutional aesthetics is that Bruguera's practice has become more concerned with nurturing relationships with patrons who wish to create value through knowledge production rather than through social or financial economies. It is here that her work aligns with Rogoff's concept of smuggling and working in a communicative manner,

²⁴ <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/mission-statement/> and <http://immigrant-movement.us/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/IM-International-Migrant-Manifesto2.pdf>

'In addition we would want to ask whether smuggling enables communication and if we can conceive and materialise a new theory of mobility out of it, one that links it more closely to the notions of 'field work', i.e. the work of fields rather than that which is located in fields, a term we are privileging at present as an understanding of our practice.' (Rogoff, 2006)

Immigrant Movement International is an example of how new institutionalism can operate with agency across both cultural and socio-political fields. Whilst her mode of *Behaviour* art is both durational and immersive Bruguera is quite clear about the divisions between public and private spheres and strongly refutes that the work is a performance:

This is not theatre. I am not making the private realm public... That space is not my artwork; living with my neighbours is not a performance. There is no pretending and I'm not doing it for anybody else's consumption.' (Bruguera cited in Noble, 2012:100)

When I visited *IMI* headquarters in Corona in February 2013 I arrived unannounced so as to ensure an authentic representation of what happens in the space. I had just missed a keep fit session arranged for local immigrants as a way of combating isolation. This was to be followed by English lessons and after schools play session for children. I met with Elisabeth Ingwersen Ganung, *IMI* project co-ordinator and we discussed the project at length. The wider outcomes Bruguera's intervention has made possible was demonstrated when two regular volunteers arrived for a meeting about creating a dual language newspaper to be disseminated internationally.²⁶

²⁶ See Fig. 10 on the next page for an image of the newspaper discussion meeting happening inside the premises when I visited the *IMI* Headquarters in Feb 2013



Fig. 11 Shows me standing outside the Immigrant Movement International headquarters, a small commercial property in the mixed residential and commercial area of Corona, Queens, New York.

The project is intended to be a durational (interventionist) project lasting for a five-year period between 2010-15. The project produced a programme of human rights related seminars, film screenings, language workshops, poetry readings and local immigrant advice workshops. It has published a manifesto, launched an immigrant respect awareness movement and instigated a day of arts led actions by internationally located artists to create awareness. Rather than operating within a limited timeframe with a preconceived project as many socially engaged projects with limited funds are forced to do. Bruguera's project will have time to mature in collaboration with requests and suggestions from the project community based in the immediate locality. However, Noble posits that

Bruguera's work is comparable to that of Joseph Beuys and suggesting that his term 'social sculpture' may bear relevance for her own practice. Of particular relevance Noble notes is the way in which their practices create an aestheticisation of the artist's subjectivity as a self-mythologised, total artwork (Noble, 2012:100).

Another critic of Bruguera's practice is Ellen Feiss who uses rights discourse in her analysis of Bruguera's project and warns that it might in fact expose immigrants to new possibilities for regulation and control suggesting that:

'While IMI attends to the urgency of immigrant access to basic rights and services, such rights also establish new routes for maintaining a second and third class citizenry.' (Feiss, 2012: online)

Feiss' criticism is particularly harsh, as there can be no doubt that Bruguera's practice is an successful example of an artist-curator stepping into a socio-political field in a project of new institutionalism that is actually making a difference to the quality of life of many people. This is a practice that functions outside of the entertainment value found in blockbuster style exhibition programming now so common in large institutions. Bruguera's project actually helps people. The project helps people to learn to communicate in America, to get jobs and to support themselves. Unlike gallery bound experiments in relational aesthetics, IMI employs an activist role from within a community to truly improve the social bond. *IMI* acknowledges the financial contributions of immigrants to the American economy. When Goldberg interviewed Bruguera, she spoke of her intention to crossover the art/life divide to create authentic, memorable situations with her art practice:

I want to work with reality. Not the representation of reality. I don't want my work to represent something. I want people not to look at it but to be in it, sometimes even without knowing it is art. This was a real situation. (Bruguera cited in Goldberg, 2005: online)

Despite Noble and Feiss's criticism of the *IMI* project, my first hand experience, was that it did not appear to be spectacularised in any way as an artwork for entertainment value. Infact it seemed to be an embedded community resource

operating as a vital counter-public space whilst simultaneously agitating the political field for the promotion of immigrant rights and improvements in quality of life and social cohesion. By subtly merging dialogue about contemporary art in real world contexts, such approaches can be seen to create direct action utilizing art in a process of curatorial smuggling.

Jeanne Van Heeswijk

Another artist whose practice explores both institutional and social change is Jeanne Van Heeswijk, whose work I have mentioned briefly earlier in the text.

Whilst researching the Curating Degree Zero Archive I read about her projects *Valley Vibes. The vibe-detector, Lea Valley, London (1998-2000)* and *Het Blauwe Huis (The Blue House) IJburg, Amsterdam (May 2005-December 2009)* which was a project intervention that took place in IJburg, a large urban district constructed on man made islands to the east of Amsterdam city centre. Here, van Heeswijk initiated an art project in a communal courtyard, from a blue townhouse in the middle. *The Blue House* was utilised as a cultural centre in a developing urban area that lacked public, social and cultural spaces. The project researched how the emerging community developed in relation to the tightly controlled urban environment. *The Blue House* as an organisation was not acting as a producer of works from a distance but by being entrenched in its environment. As Van Heeswijk describes:

The Blue House was a kind of 'objet trouve' in the middle of the block. I felt that by being there and inhabiting the house collectively we could intervene in, react to and interact with that community in growth. We've come to conceive of the project as a Housing Association for the Mind. (Van Heeswijk, in Drake, 2008,)

Both Bruguera's and Van Heeswijk's work processes provide a space and possibility for shared insights and subjectivities to emerge through art practices that are performative and that generate shared meanings through collective experience. Curator and theorist Irit Rogoff posited that works such as these

initiated mutuality between artists, audiences and participants. She suggested that:

Despite the prevailing mythologies that continue to link the experience of art to individual reflection, we do look at art, inhabit the spaces of art in various forms of collectivity and in the process we produce new forms of mutuality, of relations between viewers and spaces rather than relations between viewers and objects. (Rogoff, 2004)

Curator and critic Paul O'Neill, also linked Van Heeswijck's work to Rogoff's concept of smuggling in his extended analysis of the project he wrote that hers was a decentralized curatorial approach that:

Establishes commissioning practice as the production of a space of potentiality in which the organisation and the framing of research, cultural activity and production are brought about through a more open-ended series of principles and possibilities. (O'Neill, 2011:32)

He suggested that her curatorial strategy was about creating open structures where unplanned activities could occur and where variant practices could convene to create and share context specific dialogues. Van Heeswijck herself commented on the frameworks she created and uttered a call for sociality.²⁷ The key principles underlying her work are acting, meeting and communicating in order to create new spaces within which people can make improvements in social structures.

I visited her project *2up 2down*, in Liverpool where Van Heeswijck worked with multiple partners to create a community-led bakery that remodeled a family run bakery business, which had been forced to close in Anfield, Liverpool. The project was initially included as part of the festival of contemporary art, *Liverpool Biennial*. A core part of Van Heeswijck's project was to facilitate the transfer of ownership of the project to become self-managed by community that it served. Re-branded as *Homebaked*²⁸ it is a useful example of how the

²⁷ See Van Heeswijck, J, (2005) *A Call For Sociality* in (Ed) Purves, T, (2005) *What We Want Is Free: Generosity And Exchange In Recent Art* State University of New York Press, Albany.

²⁸ Fundraising video introducing the Homebaked project <http://vimeo.com/55803084>

curatorial device of smuggling can work to effect sustainable change in the social sphere. I discussed the project at length with Liverpool artist, Jayne Lawless, (who describes herself as an artist with a social conscience)²⁹ who has been involved with the project as an artist and local resident and with whom I shared studio space in an artist squat, Wolstenholme Contemporary Space in Liverpool City Centre during 2012. The project utilised the new institutional devices of, community formation, democratic involvement and empowerment to reform the rubric of dependence created by the hierarchical and top-down relationship of the distribution of resources between people.³⁰ Incorporating training schemes for young people to learn the baking trade and operating as a community land trust and a co-operative the project's ethos of self-management is embodied in its motto '*Brick by Brick, Loaf by Loaf, We Build Ourselves*'. Heeswijck (2005:87) suggests that we should pursue nonhierarchical forms of social interaction where communication is integral. Inherent in these new institutional forms of artistic practice are practices of dialogue and listening leading to collective action where all citizens are able to contribute ideas for the implementation of new infrastructure and networks of support. (Van Heeswijck, 2005).

Reflecting on projects such as *Homebaked* informed the development of my methodology for practice in Northwich. I came to understand that it is in this type of new institutional approach to practice, somewhere between artwork, cultural intervention and civic activism that independent curatorial research can work with a community and function in smuggling mode to seep through the gaps '*brokering the disconnect between social bureaucracies and the communities they serve*'. (Etchells, 2006) By initiating similar techniques in my own project I hoped to collaborate with others to provide a community-led alternative to the types of local authority commissioned art programming that:

Speaks to a prescribed or institutionalised agenda, asking questions laid down by agencies, of communities that are, in one sense, already judged (ibid).

²⁹ Interview between Jayne Lawless and Jeanne van Heeswijck <http://vimeo.com/50310050>

³⁰ see <http://www.2up2down.org.uk/> for more information

I realized in reflection that these new institutional process led works are developed in dialogue and guided by the hopes and wishes of members of the public in a specific locational context. Whilst in some instances they may be event based or durational contingent on funding; they developed gently avoiding any sense of spectacle. They created counter-public spaces for the formation of new communities. Artist-curatorial strategies were embedded, or smuggled into these social spaces so that possibilities for dialogues between different types of participant emerged. Similarly exhibitions in these types of curatorial practices supported the development of dialogue about the types of cultural and social spaces we might structure for ourselves. The process was not focused on immediate resolution; rather it was smuggled, its purpose being to effect social interstice so that dialogues manifested from within creating stepping-stones towards valid and sustainable social and political change.

Chapter 3: Praxical Case Study

This chapter will further elucidate how my inquiry developed through my praxical role as 'curator as citizen' or 'sholarly activist' as I undertook a case study that eventually developed into a community empty shop project, VAC Gallery in Northwich, Cheshire, UK. I will conclude the chapter with an analysis of two exhibitions that I programmed in the VAC Gallery to initiate dialogue with new audiences about contemporary art practices. These were Simon Kennedy's *Communi-sumption* and Jane Fairhurst's *Small Mythologies For The New Era*.

I began this phase of the inquiry by attempting to reach further understandings about the terms civil society and the notion of civic action. The term civil society is an elusive notion; at it's most basic it can be understood as an arena of public discussion where individuals and groups can effect active transformation and innovation. According to Helmut Anheier it is a sphere outside of '*family, government, and market where people voluntarily associate to advance common interests based on civility.*' (Anheier, 2008:)

Gramsci argued that the state might ultimately be subsumed under civil society, 'that the State's goal is its own end, its own disappearance, in other words, the re-absorption of political society within civil society'. (Gramsci 1971: 253). Gramsci's notion of the state's reabsorption was perhaps prophetic of *Big Society*³¹ rhetoric represented by the UK coalition government's desire for the decentralization of institutional power and public service reform instituted by increased levels of civic activity:

The term civic activity encompasses many things including exchange and reciprocity between citizens, e.g. time credit and time bank schemes; charitable donations of time and money and philanthropy; mutual aid; community self-help; lobbying and campaigning; involvement in decision making; voting and standing for election; community self-management; informal and formal volunteering; and civic governance. (Richardson, 2012)

Richardson listed many of the aspects of an active society encouraged by the conservative government's notion of 'The Big Society.' In the course of this research project certain elements of this discourse became interesting, 'community self-management', 'informal and formal volunteering', 'exchange and reciprocity between citizens', (Big Society Manifesto, 2010). I intended to utilise this loaded discourse as a starting point for a framework for action within my own practice. By exploring government white papers such as the Localism Bill (2010) that proposed major structural changes in public service reform, with other members of my community, I realized that I could begin to build a curatorial practice that functioned critically in response to the issues raised so that it interrogated the meanings of the terms in process of praxical socio-political engagement at a local level within my own home town of Northwich.

This section of the text introduces the case study in Northwich in greater detail. Situated 40 minutes drive from Manchester and Liverpool and 25 minutes from

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See HM Government (2010) *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5951/1793908.pdf

Chester and Warrington, the 2001 census reported that Northwich had a population of 43000 people however, at the beginning of this research project there was no facility for the display and appreciation of visual or contemporary arts in Northwich.

The Verdin Technical Schools and Gymnasium, funded by the personal wealth of Sir Joseph Verdin, Baronet of Brockhurst, Northwich, was gifted to the Northwich community in 1897 to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Intended to promote health and education and to encourage every class of society to better their self through education. It later became *The Cheshire School of Art*, known locally as '*The London Rd Studios*' and was utilised as an art college for further education purposes by Mid Cheshire College during this time Vale Royal Borough Council for a short time ran a public art gallery in two rooms however this programme finished more than a decade ago. In July 2012 Mid Cheshire College vacated the building in favour of more modern facilities on their Hartford Campus and together with other interested members of the community we formed a steering committee to take over the building and re-model it as an artist-led new institutional arts centre.³² We met with The Co-Operative Enterprise Hub and Locality to build a business case developing community ownership of the building. In addition to an administrative role researching funding opportunities and helping to write the business plan, my role was curator and I issued a call for artists to create a response to the building that would explore themes from within my research inquiry such as new institutionalism. I received submissions from two interesting artists Ruth Dillon³³ and Filippus Tsitsopulous and used their proposals as the basis of a curatorial initiative I initiated Linda Reichenfeld at Manchester Metropolitan University for a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)³⁴ between the University, our project and members of the wider community of Northwich. Dillon and I developed her proposal to suggested a socially engaged art project of community ownership where young people, who were not engaged within

³² A short video showing insight into the conceptual nature of this project during a feasibility study meeting 2012 view youtube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrXIIqa0awQ>

³³ See Dillon's original artist proposal in appendix 5.

³⁴ See draft proposal for KTP in appendix 6.

formal education or training (NEETs) might take ownership of a space within the building to create their own alternative art school.

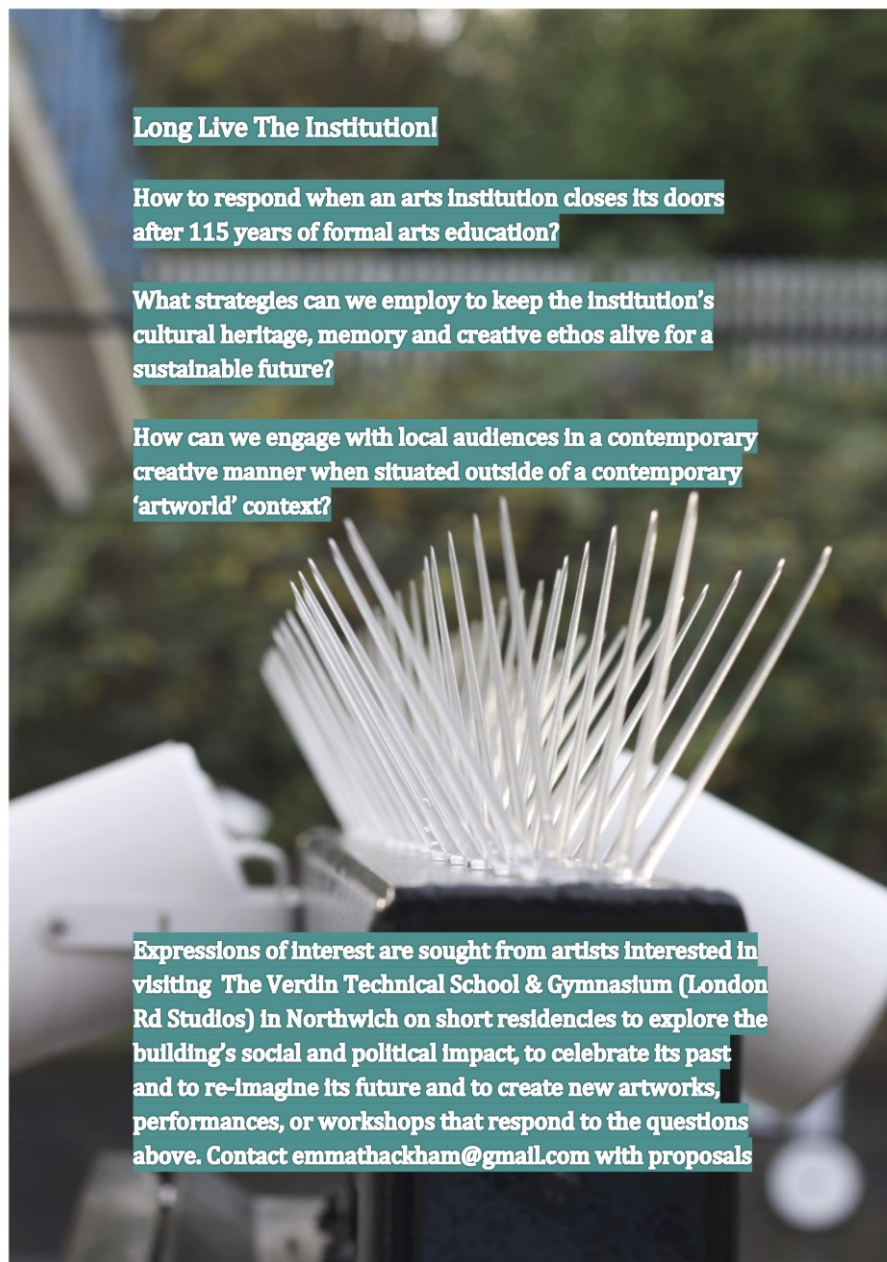


Fig. 12 A Call for artists to respond to my inquiry that I issued in Northwich, Liverpool and nationally online through the A-N website in 2013.



Fig. 13 VAC Director Gill Snowball, Weaver Vale Mp Graham Evans and Myself at The Verdin Technical Schools and Gymnasium during a meeting to discuss the buildings future use.

Photo Alan Carr

The KTP would have assisted with the business administrative side of the project so that I could concentrate on the more creative research aspects. Unfortunately before the KTP was finalised Mid Cheshire College sold the building and so I decided that it was something to explore in the progression of my research at a later stage.

Unfortunately after a four-month campaign we were unsuccessful in our aims as the building was sold to property developers. Arguably, the closure of the art school meant that Northwich lost its most important cultural asset because in addition to the production of visual arts moving further from the centre, the proximity of the art college to the town centre meant that there had been a continual supply of creative people working or living nearby and visiting the town centre.

Despite the art school being so close to town, there had been little cultural infrastructure for the display of visual art except for two small picture framing shops on the outskirts of the town. Northwich Library at one time had a programme of exhibitions until the Internet became more popular and they developed the exhibition space to provide drop-in Internet facilities. The Cheshire Retail Study Update April 2011 reported that 13.3% of Northwich's retail outlets were empty. In 2012 the Northwich shopping precinct Weaver Square went into administration resulting in the closure of many more outlets. The planned demolishing of Northwich's Memorial Hall in July 2012 with its programme of performing arts and dances would result in there being no community cultural centre in the town centre until its new build was complete and even then there were no plans for a visual art gallery inside the new building. Coupled with the lack of shops, the town was in serious danger of decline.

The Verdin Technical Schools were eventually sold by Mid Cheshire College to developers who turned them into residential apartments. However, our campaign raised awareness and created impact in the community about the heritage of the building and our lobbying of Cheshire West and Chester Council, by beginning a feasibility study process with The Heritage Lottery Fund, and discourse with English Heritage, helped to get the process rolling towards the building gaining Grade II Listed Building status to protect its heritage features.

Our intention to initiate a self managed arts centre gained momentum and together with a group of Northwich residents, I decided to formulate the next stage of the research inquiry in Northwich. My intention was to explore notions of new institutionalism and the artist-curator as citizen and to test the possibility of addressing the lack of cultural infrastructure in the town centre by initiating a project drawing from elements of new institutionalism. This would be a self-managed community and learning focused arts organisation. We sought business-planning advice and I successfully submitted an application for support from the Co-Operative Enterprise Hub. With their help we established an artist co-operative with the aim of furthering opportunities for engagement with visual

arts in Northwich. A further aim was to increase direct support for artists and exhibitions of contemporary art in Northwich. By bringing artists and contemporary art practices into the town centre we created an alternative space for arts engagement and new community of audiences. Additionally, by locating my academic curatorial praxis in a semi-rural town centre context, my aim was to pursue notions of new institutionalism and utilise a process of civic action outside of the university campus, directly in the public sphere.

My proposition was that in the development of my role, I utilised aspects of new institutionalism and elements of Rogoff's concept of curatorial smuggling as I became a dynamic worker, a type of scholar/activist, performatively engaged in creative place-making as a form of criticality; operating in direct response to the social and cultural structures I was immersed within and constructing new contexts for my practice working collaboratively with people from within the communities I was both living and working in as a citizen. Smuggling emerged here as a mode of socio-political criticality operating somewhere between the position of the Flaneur, observing the town's behaviours and yet was more active developing something of Foucault's notion of a '*critical ontology of the present*' to work with others to question the '*historical limits that are imposed on us*' in order to create the space for '*an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them*' (Foucault 1984: 50). Thus, through an embodied performative methodology, smuggling sought to understand the place I was working within and then determined possibilities for socio-political change and transformation.

My proposition explored the possibility that amidst the complexities of this process of smuggling creative and cultural discourse into a community, new cultural meanings began to emerge and we communicated different possibilities for arts institutional frameworks within our town to multiple stakeholders. These included the University (KTP), regular volunteers and visitors to the VAC Gallery project from the general public who we talked to about the aims and aspirations for the project. It also engaged a range of local

authority workers and creative professionals we initiated dialogue with to solicit their support as we established how our work could operate so as to smuggle itself into the town to fill some of the cultural gaps that had emerged due to funding cuts for arts and cultural structures and programming in the area. As Mark Kidd notes in his analysis of the American term, ‘creative placemaking’, it is necessary to find pivotal partners to build bridges and traverse normative boundaries:

Key local advocates are necessities — people who can negotiate between arts, government, and business in order to successfully incorporate community-based arts into community development and other civic processes. (Kidd, 2013)

Similarly in an American white paper on the same subject Markusen and Gadwa found that creative placemaking generates jobs and attracts skilled workers whilst fostering entrepreneurs³⁵ who:

Animat[ing] public and private spaces, rejuvenat[ing] structures and streetscapes, improv[ing] local business viability and public safety, and bring[ing] diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010:3)

Much of the intervention was on the ground work needed to create opportunities for dialogue to discuss the lack of arts infrastructure in Northwich on an informal level, by engaging members of the public in discussion in the gallery space and meeting with members of the local authority, or the mayor and the local MP over cups of tea and homemade scones, creating exhibitions for them to attend to discuss what it is that we were trying to achieve. It was in this way that we operated as dynamic workers, working in between scholarly and informal modes of practice, not only introducing art and arts infrastructure where there wasn’t any before but by generating discourse about the perceived lack of support in

³⁵ They also found that Creative Placemaking ‘Recirculates residents’ incomes locally at a higher rate. Reuses vacant and underutilized land, buildings, and infrastructure. Creates jobs in construction, local businesses, and cultural activity. Expands entrepreneurial ranks of artists and designers. Trains the next generation of cultural workers. Attracts and retains non-arts-related businesses and skills’ (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010:4)

order that stronger frameworks could be established for the on-going benefit of Northwich.

I facilitated a mode of new institutional encounter by taking my research outside of the academy, creating a new public space with opportunities for dialogue between myself as curator-researcher/curator-citizen, others involved in the project delivery, members of the public and with the artists involved in creating exhibitions at the empty shop gallery. The intention was to initiate a process of collaboration, to assist the project to gain the tools required to continue and then step back a little as ownership of the project was transferred as the new community would self-manage the project as it moved forward and as my own inquiry concluded.



Fig. 14 The 1st VAC Gallery premises before volunteers transformed it into a gallery space

The VAC empty shop artist co-operative initially had three core directors, myself, Gill Snowball and Alan Carr (an artist and photographer and both former staff at Mid Cheshire College) and a pool of volunteers from the local community who were artists and also non-artists. We worked closely with DAN Community – a charity that promotes arts events for the people of Northwich and surrounding

district but focused on the over fifty or under 18 demographic and did not have an active visual arts exhibition programme. Their arts programme was limited to a series of talks focussed on modern or renaissance art, craft workshops for children during holiday times and a season of day trips to museums and galleries. Joining forces to create an exhibition space was mutually beneficial as DAN Community became our leaseholder and we negotiated discounted rent and three quarter rates relief from Cheshire West and Chester Council due to our project support for and expansion of DAN Community's charitable aims.

The first exhibition I curated was, *The Lightfoot Letters*, was born out of a local context. Created by poet, Angela Topping who lived in the town for many years, and Maria Walker, an artist who had studied at Mid Cheshire College in Northwich. Walker found a bundle of letters in an antique shop and began to respond to the narrative content in her textile art work. She later found out that they happened to be written by Angela's grandparents and father. Angela then wrote some poems that responded to the letters and they collaborated to create an exhibition of textile art that responded to the poems and letters.



Fig.15 Some of Maria Walker's textile artworks hang in the gallery window during *The Lightfoot Letters* exhibition

VAC gallery moved into CWAC's former Connexions offices at 97 Brunner Court, Northwich in January 2013. We spent a month turning the empty premises into an art gallery – all work being undertaken by volunteers. Our inaugural programme included a three-month exhibition, '*The Lightfoot Letters*' by textile artist Maria Walker and poet, Angela Topping. I programmed poetry workshops and readings and an international collaborative drawing project with Artist Ivan Liotchev that reached audiences of all ages both on site in the empty shop gallery and offsite at the closing ceremony of the Memorial Hall.



Fig. 16 Graham Evans and Council Officials visit the VAC pop up shop and take part in the International Drawing Project drop in art workshop

Photo: Alan Carr

We programmed events such as a performative Japanese Tea Ceremony as part of Yellow Door Artists exhibition *Ichi -Go-Ichi-E* and inviting experiencers from the local community in off the street to sample Japanese tea and sweets made by the artists we created a platform for new kinds of encounter from the shell of an

empty shop and encouraged visitors to get involved in re-imagining the use for empty shops on the highstreet.



Fig. 17 The completed collaborative drawing, part of Ivan Liotchev's International Drawing project.



Fig. 18 *Yellow Door* artists performing a Japanese Tea Ceremony at VAC empty shop Gallery



Fig.19 Visitor Angela Topping samples Japanese sweets offered by *Yellow Door* Artist Jacqui Priestley after the tea ceremony

There were many triumphs when we finally opened the doors to the first pop up art gallery with *The Lightfoot Letters*. Helping to build up of community spirit and dwell time in the town centre due to engagement with contemporary and community exhibitions was a sign of success, at our busiest periods VAC gallery brought more than 200 people into the town per day.



Fig 20 Intricately embroidered artworks hung in the window of the gallery creating a domestic aesthetic to the empty shop gallery.

Photo: Alan Carr

There were many small encounters that held significance in the process such as receiving the keys to the first empty shop property and feeling that there may be

some possibilities to utilise notions such as localism, community activism and civic action. Sourcing exhibition materials and exploring an abandoned school, recycling plinths and lighting systems to pull together the professional appearance of a gallery space out of high street remains of a former youth service employment hub. Visiting many of the towns abandoned buildings with my fellow volunteers, trying to re-imagine possibilities for the town's future. By programming an evening opening of the local bistro café, we disrupted the habitual jangling of locks at 4pm, the usual time the high street hangs up it's hat and fades away.

Instead it felt poignant to have created an intervention in the public sphere of our town. I will never forget escaping outside of the gallery on the busy opening night of *The Lightfoot Letters* to listen to the murmur of voices, and glasses of wine clinking, watching people stoop to examine a piece of artwork, deciphering a line from an Angela Topping poem out of Maria Walker's embroidered sculptural typewriter installation. I utilised a creative curatorial approach to create a domestic space in the formerly commercial setting of a career advice office.³⁶

When looking over to the bistro across the square, it was fun to see people enjoying a hot-pot supper at our neighbouring café and indulging unawares in a performative happening. I'd arranged it so that our visitors, by taking up the offer for hot-pot supper and a glass of wine would be supporting a local enterprise whilst contributing to both the social and cultural economy and also be implicated, (with a nod to Relational Aesthetics) performatively embodying a line lifted from the actual Lightfoot Letters that was included in a piece of Maria Walker's artwork:

I'd going to a do on Wednesday a (hot-pot) supper. but I'll have to use a knife and fork . (But I would rather have a spoon). (Lightfoot, P, 1923 in the original Lightfoot Letters)

³⁶ See a report to the impact of my curatorial response to The Lightfoot Letters exhibition written by textile artist Maria Walker in the appendix



Fig. 21 *I'd Rather Have A Spoon II*, by Maria Walker from the Lightfoot Letters Exhibition at VAC Gallery.

It seemed for a little while at least that Culture 3.0 self-organisation could indeed work to readjust or reclaim the social sphere and begin to instigate cultural change.

Smuggling occurred in encounters with artists, artworks, council officials and experiencers and during the discussions about the underlying theories that inform the curatorial process have accumulated and developed in this project having been shared or presented informally; discussed over a cup of tea or slice of cake, during a walk in a garden or whilst making pinhole photographs, as well as in a formal lecture scenario and via an exposition of documentation as might be more normal in a museum or university context.

Not all of the work shown at VAC Gallery was of a contemporary nature, it may have been alienating to members of the public if it had been and it was necessary to negotiate with other members of the gallery team and our visitors and artist participants who attended the gallery, to ensure that they had authorship rights over the programme so that it was co-produced with myself.

Using more traditional methods, Culture 1.0 modes of practice, was often useful. For example, Ivan Liotchev's simple device of a collaborative drawing turned out to be a useful way to engage visitors in dialogue about the wider empty-shop project. We finished the programme with a very well attended Open Exhibition and by the end of our tenure our visitor book showed that we had reached a huge new audience of over 2000 visitors from a local and national geographical demographic.

In May 2013 we were forced to give up the tenancy at Brunner Court when CWAC found a commercial tenant who could pay full rent. We were offered a 3-month rent-free lease in the nearby 93 Brunner Court (a former Health Food Shop).

Again, we redecorated the space through volunteer effort we opened the first exhibition in June 2014. Following the free period we negotiated to pay one quarter rent and business rates and were forced to alter programming slightly organising an additional open art exhibition, a shop selling local artists work and delivering extra art workshops in order generate revenues.



Fig. 22 The former health food shop at 93 Brunner Court before we renovated the building into a second VAC Gallery with lots of volunteer support. Image Alan Carr

Following the success of *The Lightfoot Letters* exhibition, textile artist Maria Walker brought a project titled '*Dress a Girl Around The World*' to our attention.³⁷ VAC director, Gill Snowball, also had textile expertise and so we formulated an idea to run workshops and demonstrations about dress making techniques to engage a multiple age demographic in skill sharing and in an attempt to create one hundred dresses for girls in need of new clothing throughout the world. In order to introduce new audiences to the idea of the contemporary 'flash mob' art installation; my curatorial contribution was the development of an idea to hang the dresses in the VAC Gallery space at the end of the project to demonstrate it to a wider public and to transform the work from a traditional craft activity into an

³⁷ see <http://www.dressagirlaroundtheworld.com/> for further information.

immersive contemporary art installation. With the support of local press³⁸the project was a huge success and over 200 dresses were made, fashion students from Mid Cheshire got involved, local businesses donated material and women of all ages made dresses. A gentleman who would never have visited the gallery donated all of his late wife's sewing machines and other paraphernalia. He later revisited and became involved in the wider VAC gallery project by creating a wooden stand to hold artist's prints.



Fig. 23 VAC Gallery Co-Director Gill Snowball adds more dresses to the Flash Mob style exhibition
Dress a Girl Around The World

38

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10881742.Mid_Cheshire_community_dresses_girls_around_the_world/?ref=rss



Fig 24 Before: The gallery space as an empty shop

Photo: Alan Carr



Fig. 25 After: Artists Jill Walker demonstrates knowledge exchange by sharing her intricate wire sculpture skills with artist Maria Walker in the newly refurbished VAC pop up art gallery.

Photo: Alan Carr



Fig 26 Artists are seen working in the square outside of VAC pop up gallery in Northwich whilst interacting with members of the public

Photo: Alan Carr



Fig. 27 A Pinhole photograph I took during a photography workshop I facilitated at the gallery



Fig. 28 I'm seen here in the square outside of the pop up gallery with a workshop participant comparing a pinhole photograph to the scene it depicts

Photo: Alan Carr



Fig. 29 I'm seen here with my Son Ethan, a workshop participant, taking a pinhole photograph using a camera made from a tin box

Photo: Alan Carr

As part of the process of criticality I reflected on where the work might lead. I visited artist, Ailie Rutherford in her studio in Liverpool, where we discussed her project *On Civil Grounds* in depth. This was a project where eight young people were invited to work with Rutherford and architect Marianne Heaslip and urban designer Anna Couch at Liverpool's artist run space, *The Royal Standard* in order to develop new ideas and proposals for specific sites along Vauxhall Road in Liverpool. I was intrigued and wanted to learn more about the projects possibilities for reaching new audiences, who were unfamiliar with contemporary art. I began a dialogue with Rutherford about her projects, *The Psychic Power of Plants* and *Ganzfeld*, where she created sculptural devices that purportedly aided in telepathic drawing. Whether or not such telepathy was indeed possible was beside the point, for me, the most interesting part of the artwork was contained within the participant's phenomenological interaction with the sculptural device, and the resounding potential for intrigue that such devices could evoke in participants, were at the heart of those projects.

The potential for smuggling contemporary art into everyday situations was why working with Rutherford on a project in Northwich was an exciting prospect. Together we developed an idea after I noticed a series of large crystals on a shelf in her studio. I explained to Rutherford about my interest into the ownership and rights to use civic sites as spaces for the development and consumption of contemporary art and suggested an idea I would like to explore to reach new audiences. I began a proposal to commission Rutherford to work with people at Northwich bus terminal in a drawing project on their journey from the town centre to their homes located in local council estates. I was keen to move away from the pop up shop model to creating work outside of a building/institutional based model. Rutherford suggested she could utilise the crystals I had noticed, to create a new sculptural drawing device and she later further developed the proposal whereby the passengers would use the sculptural crystal drawing device as an interface to imagine new future for uses of community sites or spaces they would see on their journeys. This project is as yet unrealised but is an example of the type of work the research inquiry might go on to explore.

The following section of text will analyse two of the exhibitions I programmed at The VAC Gallery in-order to introduce different types of contemporary practice in a semi-rural town centre context. I chose artists whose work might be seen to initiate dialogue with a viewer/participant about notions of contemporary identity and importantly they were challenging exhibitions, different to the types of work many visitors may have encountered before locally so that dialogue was built about the types of work shown at the gallery in the specific locational context of Northwich. Both artists, Simon Kennedy and Jane Fairhurst might be considered to utilise elements of Irit Rogoff's notion of 'smuggling' to introduce political ideas through the means of visual art practice.

Simon Kennedy: *Communi-sumption*



Fig. 30 Installation View: Communi-Sumption Photo by visitor James Kershaw and posted on Twitter

"What was the first thing you did this morning? Brush your teeth? Take a shower? Or, did you anxiously search for your phone or some other device to check for overnight message streams and online activity? If this sounds like you, you're not alone but how many of us pause to question this neurotic behaviour that is now considered to be the norm?" (Kennedy, 2013)

The questions cited above were posed in the marketing material for *Communi-sumption* by artist Simon Kennedy, an exhibition I programmed with the intention of inviting discourse about the possibilities for the type of work programmed in Northwich, a semi-rural market town context which previously

had little arts engagement except for village hall exhibitions of leisure paintings. I was keen to programme an artist who resided locally to create an exhibition for the pop up gallery and Simon Kennedy approached me about the exhibition he'd been developing, *Communi-sumption*. I was interested in learning more about it and invited Kennedy to visit me at the gallery to open up a discourse about how it might work at the gallery and the various discourses the exhibition might set at play. I was particularly interested to work with Kennedy as he told me he had struggled to find a gallery in Cheshire that would work with him to realise the exhibition due to its contemporary format. As part of what I wanted to do with the pop up gallery in Northwich was to smuggle more challenging types of contemporary work into a local discourse, working with Kennedy to make the exhibition happen was an exciting prospect. *Communi-sumption* was a scholarly exhibition drawing on multiple discourses about human behaviour and commenting on the mass digitalization of culture. Kennedy had observed an increasingly mediatized society, finding himself surrounded by:

A sea of lowered heads, eyes transfixed as if in an, 'otherworldly trance' and hands fervently tapping, typing and scrolling. Rather than conversation the only thing audible is an electronic, jazz like discord of message alerts and ringtones. (Kennedy, 2013)

Kennedy utilised online marketing techniques in a countdown to the exhibition including interactions on Facebook and Twitter to generate material to begin a dialogue with the VAC Gallery audience of social media members. He utilized a text based response to the marketing by artist and regular gallery visitor Maria Walker, on the Visual Arts Cheshire Facebook page, as the main image in the flyer used to advertise the exhibition so that the issue of appropriation of individual's personal digital data was foregrounded from the outset and further explored in the online dialogue between myself as curator-programmer and Kennedy, as artist. I've included an excerpt of the discourse between us in the documentation accompanying this writing (Appendix 12). Ironically our discourse in this instance was undertaken using the Facebook Messenger application. I suggested that rather than use generic, 'made-up' data, he should

infact, appropriate the actual Facebook data of members of the Visual Arts Cheshire Facebook page. This work became *Friends Top Trumps* (2013).



Fig. 31 Gallery Director Alan Carr is seen here (centre) explaining nature of the artwork and game *Friends Top Trumps* to gallery visitors Maria Walker (left) and Tony Snowball (right).

I hoped that by appropriating their personal data, visitors to the exhibition they would react with questions about the artist's process and relate to it more strongly than if the artist had just used anonymous data and also Kennedy's visual comment on the negative infiltration methods utilised in media such as Facebook to compromise their users privacy would be made more strongly.

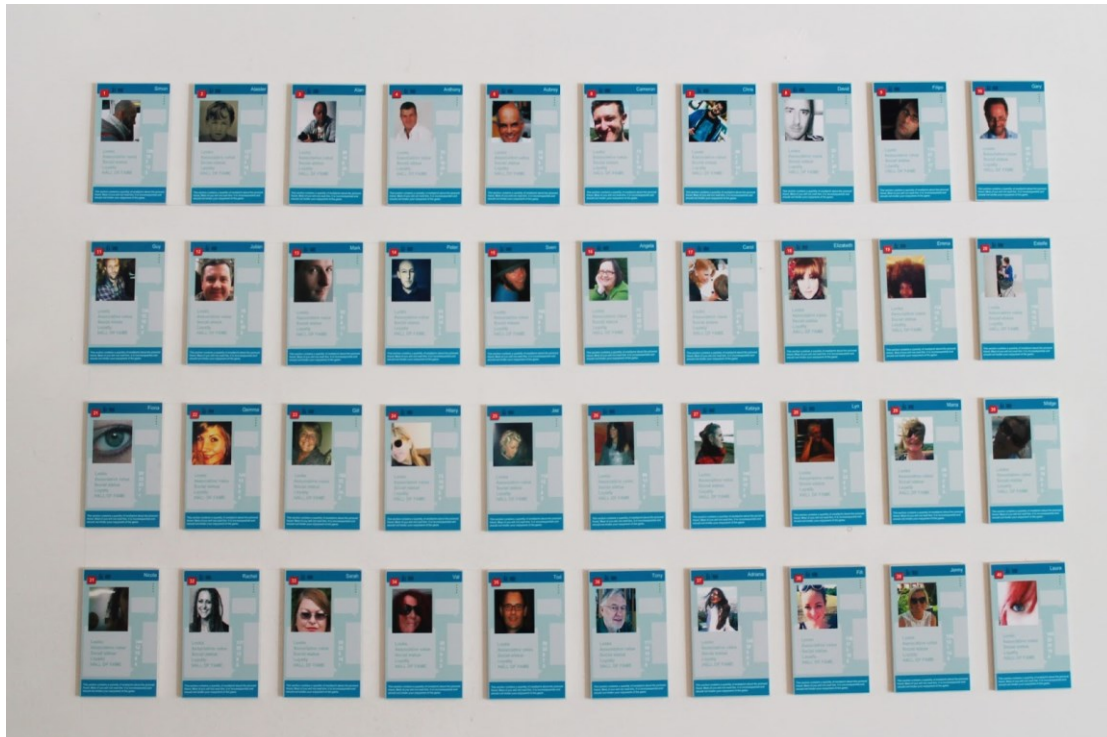


Fig.32 Friends Top Trumps were exhibited on the gallery wall and also in card form in an interactive play zone for visitors to use.

We did not receive any complaints about appropriating people's data which was disappointing in some ways as the discourse around the subject could have been further explored but I did utilise the subject in many personal exchanges with gallery visitors which gave me lots of opportunities to discuss my research around curatorial smuggling on a one to one verbal basis.

In including actual data from Facebook friends of the gallery, Kennedy provoked the gallery visitor with questions about their habitual use of media devices. *Communi-sumption* commented on the ways in which society is now saturated with digital technologies, how phenomena such as the internet, smartphones and tablets are impacting upon our lives, dominating the ways in which we relate to each other, represent ourselves, work, rest and play:

You couldn't live your life through your 'Walkman' in the way that we now live our lives through our smart-phones and tablets. "There was no element of connectivity". I couldn't buy things with my 'Walkman', I couldn't check my bank balance or contact a friend. I couldn't shout

(tweet) my disapproval of a Government policy, I couldn't watch a film or create a document, I couldn't post pictures or have it locate my position on a map. (Kennedy, 2013)

In another piece, *Re-Framed*, (Fig below) Kennedy presents an art installation of empty picture frames alongside a personal photograph from his youth and domestic items



Fig. 33 *Re-Framed* an art installation by Simon Kennedy a part of the *communi-sumption* exhibition on display at VAC Gallery

such as a dresser. The absence of full images and the implied sense of withdrawn humanity demonstrated in his use of the pale silhouettes in the windows of the picture frames, speak to the phenomenon of increasing loneliness and alienation felt in everyday life by a generation of people that are supposedly more connected than ever online but who have become socially awkward and dysfunctional in real world relationships. The family photograph draws the viewer's eye, evoking a sense of nostalgia for times past, spent

together instead of separated by our obsessions with our handheld devices. The different types of discourses generated by the *Communi-sumption* exhibition were demonstrated on many occasions, a few tweets on twitter, via interaction with the artworks in the gallery space, informally in conversation or through more formal means such as an exhibition review, (see a response by visitor and volunteer Hawksworth³⁹), during a video interview and informal discussion with her and in response on the social networking site Facebook by Estelle Woolley:

Slightly oxymoronic that I am re-posting an exhibition about the virtual made physical back into the virtual world again, but here are some photos! A very thought provoking exhibition. (Woolley, 2013:online)

As Hawksworth wrote in her response to the exhibition:

The exhibition born as a result of Kennedy's frustration with the overwhelming pressure to fit in and submit to our increasingly electronic society. (Hawksworth, 2013:online)

Kennedy's exhibition can be read as a visual manifestation of his lack of control of the slippery nature of cyber domination. In *communi-sumption* he commands control and resists the dematerialization of culture using analogue means to render the immaterial concrete once more. For example in *She-Mail* (fig 2), the symbol for sent mail is rendered concrete by the materialization of an actual paper aeroplane suspended in the gallery space, Kennedy's play on words parallels his visual puns in works such as *twitter litter*, a metallic waste bin emanating birdsong and over-spilling with origami birds. Each folded creation is made from sheets of paper printed with appropriated tweets talking about the exhibition. This was an accumulative work intended to smuggle dialogue from social media into the exhibition space so that audiences contribute to the work in progress. Using tweets including the #origamitweets or #communisumption hashtags, audience members could converse with the artist or each other about the exhibition and hierarchies of authorship were diminished. Also by holding an artist in residence day with Kennedy in attendance inside the pop up gallery,

³⁹ Read Hawksworth's response to Communi-Sumption in the appendix or here <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4YJBbRMIMO-d3Q5bUdXUDFRTFE/preview>

audiences were encouraged to join the discourse at the gallery creating new origami *Twitter Litter* pieces in real time.

Kennedy was particularly interested in the incidental nature of 'tweeting' which if to be made manifest in reality:

would be akin to walking down the street and randomly shouting out, significant for only a couple of minutes before they disappear off the page and become obsolete, they reminded me of scratch cards, exciting for a moment and then discarded as rubbish. (Kennedy, 2013: online).



Fig.34 *Twitter Litter* - was an interactive artwork, tweets informed by the exhibition were printed, cut into squares and shaped into origami sculptures before being added to the growing display throughout the duration of the exhibition

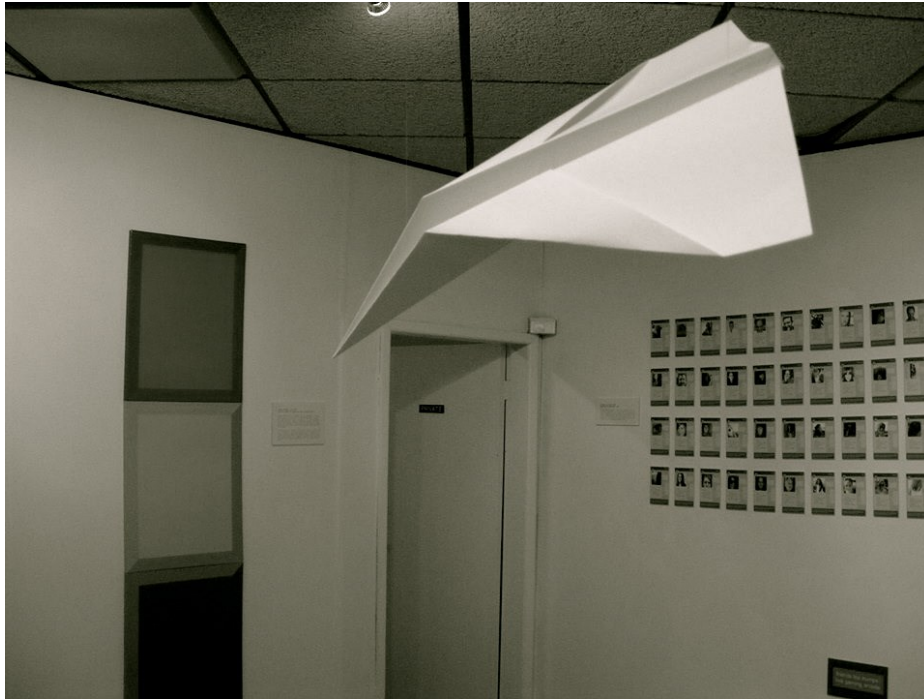


Fig. 35 *She-Mail*, part of *Communi-Sumption* by Simon Kennedy at VAC Gallery. August 2013

Kennedy's aesthetic is esoteric, it sits in part within discourse about social media art,⁴⁰ but it partly utilises mediums of painting more reminiscent of post minimalism. This spills over into his critique of social media in works such as *She-Mail*, the paper aeroplane strung from the ceiling, a visual manifestation of the sent email symbol we more commonly see in online environments. The simplistic design of this piece, a well known childhood activity, evoked much debate about what constitutes contemporary art at all. *Communi-sumption* was programmed in the school holidays, specifically to address the younger audiences in addition to the older generation of regular visitors, we later scheduled a social media workshop to explore methods for engaging with social media for artists.

Kennedy's exhibition opened up much debate about the work we were doing in Northwich, as one volunteer directly questioned '*are you just programming contemporary work that people from a provincial town just aren't going to be interested in?*' (August 2013:direct dialogue). This exchange occurred between

⁴⁰ For a fuller explanation of social media art see Pollack, B (2011) *The Social Revolution* <http://www.artnews.com/2011/06/01/the-social-revolution/>

two visitors who had distinctly different views about the exhibition and myself. One woman asserted that this had been her favourite exhibition to date because it was so different to other exhibitions she had seen and had really made her stop and think, both about the content of the exhibition and the form. Whilst the other woman was uncomfortable with the visual aesthetic which became a barrier to her mediation of the exhibition.

Through regularly being in the gallery as a volunteer as well as in my role as director and curator I was able to help interpret the artwork by engaging both women in informal conversation. From the position of curator, I was able to initiate a dialogical interaction where insights and understandings were shared. Conversation about the types of exhibitions we should programme led back to the woman who had negative response to *Communi-sumption* actually drawing comparisons with the content of an earlier exhibition, *The Lightfoot Letters*.

She suggested that in contemporary culture, and partly due to the successes of feminism, access to mass media devices and because of changes to the economy, gender roles have merged and, particularly the ability to apply for a mortgage on two wages have increased house prices as both people in a couple are forced to work.

The exhibition motivated her to think about the economic climate where both parents in a family are forced to go out to work, she drew the conclusion that this has had an impact on culture and traditions in family life so that behavior has changed. It is from amidst the encounter of this type, (a simple conversation or micro-communication, in an empty health-food shop, now transformed into an exhibition space and community hub), that I am glad to remember that this type of interaction is the core of the research inquiry.

The methodology of smuggling, in my interpretation, was demonstrated during *Communi-Sumption* when engaging in informal dialogue with visitors to the gallery. For example, with our local Weaver Vale MP Graham Evans who

engaged with Kennedy's artwork by making origami tweets in a drop in workshop activity. This was not a devised encounter, it was an organic happening, whilst Evans had been invited into the gallery in formal capacities, (to give a speech at the opening ceremony, or to meet with the gallery board members to discuss assistance or influence he may be able to assert with the local authority in regards to our tenure for example), on this occasion he was visiting of his own free will, with his son, who had also attended one of my pin hole photography workshops and also entered drawings into a community exhibition. The device of a drop in art workshop, in this case folding paper printed with tweets generated about the exhibition into origami birds, enabled me to engage with a ten year old boy, and my local MP, his father, in a discussion about the nature of contemporary art and how it differs from more traditional painting and drawing, we explored specific artworks within the exhibition.



Figs.36 and 37 Graham Evans and son Tom attempt to make origami tweets

The opportunity to discuss contemporary art in this manner was in stark contrast to our first meeting with Mr Evans, undertaken in a boardroom at his constituency office in Runcorn. I had booked an appointment to meet him at one of his monthly community surgery session and attended with the other directors of Visual Arts Cheshire. We were greeted with a handshake, he had an assistant taking notes and whilst Evans was attentive and helpful with his insights into how he might be of assistance, we were shuffled in and out within an allotted ten-minute time frame.

The opportunity to share knowledge was much more formal at his surgery session, it felt like the quality of the less formal encounter at the gallery, during *Communi-Sumption* was so much more effective in delivering the message about what we were trying to explore with the community space.

It is in these small exchanges where discourse about art and society are shared and where artworks resonate with viewers that the process of the curatorial methodology bears fruit in a process of criticality. When smuggling, underground communities create new systems of value. An interesting device revealed by Gill Snowball, in a conversation at the VAC gallery about the notion of smuggling in this inquiry, was that in the 1980s her community of friends developed a curtain hooks childcare exchange scheme as an alternative to cash payments. The curatorial methodology operates in action, before the researcher retreats to reflect, analyse and filter the exchange by writing it up and concretising it. This is where the informal and scholarly, community and institutional conflicts converge into moments of being and knowing in praxis.

Small Mythologies For The New Era: Jane Fairhurst



Fig. 38 The marketing poster for Small Mythologies For The New Era



Fig. 39 *Trophies* (tree root installation) photographed during an encounter session in Jane Fairhurst's studio prior to the exhibition *Small Mythologies For The New Era* at VAC Gallery.

Artist Jane Fairhurst is a founder member of Cross St Arts in Standish. In the exhibition of sculpture and installation works, *Small Mythologies For The New Era*, Fairhurst created her own talismans and new folk power objects. Prior to the exhibition we embarked upon a series of dialogues at her farmhouse near Wigan, we drank tea and wandered in her garden engaged in dialogue about her life and art. The garden, an artwork itself, is maze like with multiple sections. It houses beehives along with artworks both completed and in process. Hand

stitched voodoo dolls blow in the wind. Half hidden, their colourful forms and embellishments emerge from amongst plants and flowers, having been lynched, hanged from trees and plants to weather and gain character before the exhibition. Both natural and found objects are recurring motifs in her work that is itself conceived from amidst nature. The works are often formulated as she finds unusual natural objects on walks in the countryside. They manifest further within nature, in her garden as I witnessed, or in the home workshop she shared with her children before they grew up and moved away. Sometimes pieces emerge in her formal studio a few minutes drive away at Cross St in Standish, before being presented to a public via exhibition.

I enjoy this stage of the curatorial process immensely. By engaging in in-depth conversations I uncover a better understanding of the contexts imbued within Fairhurst's works so that I am better able to engage members of the public in meaningful dialogue about the works at a later stage. Hours slip away as we visit her studio in Standish and we continued the dialogue later via interview, email and letter. I was keenly interested in her earlier work so we spent much time discussing the project *Rise Up and Build* undertaken in Skelmersdale, (2010-12), a collaboration with artist Tim Fielding where research led to the exploration of why the utopian ideals behind the building of the New Town in Skelmersdale were perceived to have failed. There were resonances between that project and the context of my own engagement in Northwich in terms of presenting contemporary art in contexts that operate outside of a mainstream contemporary arts world. Northwich, like Skelmersdale, has recently embarked upon a phase of regeneration demolishing modernist architecture similar to that found in Skelmersdale so her previous work was contextually relevant and a driver for the decision to invite Fairhurst to exhibit in Northwich.

We explored through discussion whether her works are intentionally created to address and create dialogue with non-regular arts-going audiences. We resolved that the works speak to different registers of audiences. An interesting aspect of our discussion revolved around the reception of her work, and the presentation of contemporary practice in town centre locations. We discussed the challenges

she has experienced having work censored in the past when working in a town based context, outside of an established arts world city location, by a local authority arts officer and she suggested that Wigan for a time, seemed to have an 'arts prevention officer' rather than somebody to support the work of emerging artists. I was interested to know whether Fairhurst felt that as independent artists and curators, we have an obligation to intervene in established institutional frameworks to present works that challenge audiences and offer new perspectives about what types of work can be shown in town centre galleries.

artists have (I believe) to challenge the public but I also believe that exhibitions need to be interesting and offer up explanations. Some exhibitions are so dry and inaccessible as to be off putting to all but the most hardened academic! Elitist rather than aspirational.
(Fairhurst, 2013: direct dialogue)

Fairhurst is an advocate for the importance of challenging perceptions and offering new perspectives through work shown in both town centre galleries and non-gallery spaces in addition to more formal arts institutions.



Fig. 40 Artist Jane Fairhurst (red cardigan) at the opening of the exhibition

Many of Fairhurst's objects reference talismans and amulets. Historically these devices have been created to protect their wearer from threats or evil, in discussion with Fairhurst prior to the exhibition I was interested to learn about the threats she perceives in contemporary culture and how or why she creates works that make comment on them. She revealed that there is a deep political driver to much of her work, she was active as a member of the Labour party until Tony Blair took the country to war in Iraq (2003). Her exhibition contends that in an increasingly urbanised environment we are reaching a place '*where we can no longer continue to abuse the earths resources and perpetuate wars for energy (oil)*'. (*ibid*) The promise of humour utilised in her goggle-eyed avocado stones vanishes instantaneously when in conversation she revealed that they contain a hidden family confession about personal experiences of the atrocities war. The avocado stones represent the annihilation of innocents and the futility of dumbly following orders whilst being burdened with duty to one's own country. Their personified presence is in fact a wry reminder of the vulnerability of morals, honour and decency at times of international conflict. That their form echoes Gormley's terracotta army (*Field*, 1991) is an intention that perhaps illuminates further Fairhurst's ability to represent disjointed identities as Western societies blunder forward for economic gain and domination.



Fig 41. Gallery visitors inspect Fairhurst's sculptures

Fairhurst's 'New Era' is an entanglement of forces and beliefs presented as a counterpoint to mass commodification. The amalgamation of cultural signifiers in her sculptural environments comment on the over saturation of commercial signifiers present in globalized society.

The works speak out about the overlapping of sacred sites and traditions, of false idols and fabricated conventions. Encountering the exhibition space the viewer is slowly engulfed by the aesthetic communities she has created; artificial eco-systems of plants and animals rendered in black are subtly reminiscent of 19th Century museum displays. In conversation Fairhurst revealed that J G Ballard's literary works inspired part of the exhibition. The title of the exhibition even, *Small Mythologies For the New Era*, might have been derived from the title of Ballard's short story, *Myths of the New Era*. One piece in fact shares it's title with his 1975 novel, *High Rise*. Structurally it is representative of the inhabitants of Ballard's dystopian high rise tower block, rising upwards like an abject monument to dystopian civilization, Fairhurst's *High Rise* is a monochrome dysfunctional high society of plastic toys. Metaphorically it resembles the themes of the novel, hysteria and anarchy reign is the muddle of children's zoo

animals and other plastic figures, contained within large bell jars, could be seen to represent the amalgamation of,

a well-to-do and well-educated proletariat of the future boxed up in these expensive apartments with their elegant furniture and intelligent sensibilities, and no possibility of escape (Ballard, 1975:81).

In his review of Ballard's novel Rick McGrath suggests that characters in his text,

seek a kind of highly personal psychic salvation, and that they will, if necessary, create their own self-defining mythologies and pursue them to their furthest logical ends, no matter how illogical it seems, or what the cost. (McGrath, 2004: online)

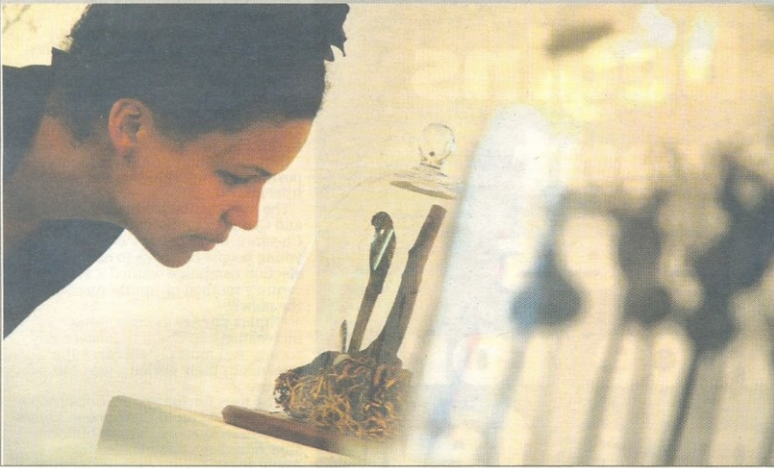
Fairhurst's role as artist manifests similarly, she too, relentlessly pursues new mythologies; but where traditionally a talisman must be charged or consecrated by its maker, Fairhurst paradoxically reveals the whole exercise as a hoax, religion she insists has been proved obsolete:

science has brought us a way to prove theories...it has shown us that religion has been proved defunct (also misogynist) but on many occasions science has proven that 'old wives tales' have some bars of truth. (Fairhurst, 2013: Direct dialogue)

Fairhurst appropriates religious iconography in her work as an aesthetic choice but intended meaning goes deeper. She in fact subverts meaning, by rendering icons into her artifacts surreptitiously. In dialogue it emerges that this is a contemptuous gesture that exposes the exploitation undertaken by the marketing departments of religious institutions, who commodify ancient symbology for commercial gains. Many of her works comment on the MacDonaldisation of society.⁴¹

⁴¹ See George Ritzer, (1993) *The MacDonaldization of Society* in which it is suggested that elements of McDonaldization manifest in society through rationality: capitalist mechanisms of increased efficiency, predictability, calculability and control over people by means of non-human technologies. According to Ritzer, MacDonaldisation leads to fracturing of family life, alienation and dehumanization.

Art exhibition uses toys... with a real twist



ART lovers have until Saturday to enjoy the latest exhibition at a Northwich art gallery.

Small Mythologies for the New Era, by Jane Fairhurst, uses a range of sculpture, craftwork, painting, drawing and installation and explores a world of talismans, charms and amulets.

Many of her pieces use toys, sometimes with a dark twist, and have a 'make do and mend' feel.

Jane said: "As an artist I like to create an exhibition where there's something for everyone."

"People have an immediate 'in', particularly the work with toys as people recognise something in them."

"I very much grew up with a post-war make-do-and-mend attitude so I use plastic shark tails in one piece then I use the heads in another."

The exhibition is at the Visual Arts Cheshire Gallery, in Brunner Court.

Emma Thackham, curator at the gallery, said: "I wanted to have an exhibition that would really transform the space and something really strong."

All are welcome to attend.

Fig. 42 Article discussing *Small Mythologies For the New Era* and image of myself inspecting works– Photograph courtesy of Northwich Guardian.

Toys are utilised in other works to similarly critique the practices of globalized commodification aimed towards children by large corporations and by



Fig. 43 *Irmisul* mixed-media sculpture by Jane Fairhurst.

presenting these works under glass vitrines she invokes not only new mythologies but also a new museology that provokes dialogue with visitors:

If there is anything that differentiates the 'new museology' from the 'old,' it is the idea that a museum installation is a discourse, and that an exhibition is an utterance within that discourse. The utterance consists not of words and images alone, but of the productive tension between images, caption, and installation. (Bal, 2001: online)

Fairhurst's new mythologies are smuggled into our consciousness through their visual imagery but also via their titles. Captions, such as *Irmisul*, *High Rise* or *Norn Tree* provided mysterious points of access for the audience member to delve further. I arranged a public seminar with questions and answers where Fairhurst spoke the individual pieces of work and her methodologies for creating them. She revealed some of the many nuances of her practice. Many visitors explored the titles further using the Internet on their smart phones. In doing so in certain cases perhaps, visitors were able to create their own mythologies anew?

I programmed *Small Mythologies for The New Era* as its wider discourses seemed entirely relevant to the citizens of Northwich amidst their struggles to survive economic decline and re-imagine possibilities for the renewal of their town centre and re-formatting of public spaces such as the VAC Gallery. Fairhurst's use of materials was a talking point amongst the thrifter of visitors:

"I very much grew up with a post-war make-do-and-mend attitude so when I use plastic shark tails in one piece then I use the heads in another." (Fairhurst cited in Bebbington, 2013:online)

and she made frequent visits to the charity shops in the town centre on each visit to the gallery - treasure hunting for potential found objects to be made into new works.

As Suzi Gablick writes in *The Reenchantment of Art*, there is an undercurrent absence in our culture. Our societies are preoccupied with capitalism and inherent consumerist ideologies deny the presence of mythology in everyday consciousness:

The remythologizing of consciousness, then, is not a regressive plunge into the premodern world...it represents a change in how the modern self perceives who it truly is, when it stretches back and contacts much vaster realities than the present-day consumer system of our addicted industrial societies. (Gablick, 1991:57)

A question that the exhibition left simmering then is; in an increasingly secular society, should it be the responsibility of the artists and curators to charge objects and public spaces with new meanings and to foster situations that re-imagine possibilities for our socio-political sphere in order to draw attention to & stimulate discourse about problems or challenges within society?

Chapter 4: Concluding insights

Chapter two introduced key critical territories; the notion of new institutionalism and the concepts of smuggling and civic action being useful as curatorial devices that may aid in the creation of counter public spaces for engagement with contemporary art. This concluding chapter will revisit these significant points in the light of the analysis of the third chapter, where these devices were employed as a catalyst for creating dialogue about and with new audiences for contemporary art practice in the specific locational sphere of Northwich.

This study has illustrated that an essential obligation of community based, activist artist-curatorial practice is to revise theories about the notions of community based artistic production and value as they are defined by dominant institutional ideologies.

Through consideration of Doherty (2004) and others it has explored new institutionalism in praxis to demonstrate that curatorial researchers must remain responsive to their environments whilst pursuing the potential for renewal and reform of community space.

Where the research inquiry surprised me was in the revelation that the larger, leading institutions of new institutionalism are being remodeled due to the effects of tightened public purse strings. In 2007 Nina Montmann revealed that since the zenith of new institutional activity in the late 1990's and early 2000's

many of the cornerstone institutions have since been remodeled in ways that work against key principles of the new institutionalism movement.⁴² She suggested this happened because, *'what is not wanted, in short, is criticality. Criticality didn't survive the "corporate turn" in the institutional landscape.'* (Montmann, 2007:online) Montmann noted that, *'most of the institutions seem to have been put in their place like insubordinate teenagers.'* (Ibid) We felt this effect ourselves in the local authorities' reluctance to subsidise the empty shop gallery premises for any longer than three months because of the difficulties in developing commercial business activity. The paradox of this was that three months didn't allow the skeleton of volunteer staff enough time to focus on business planning and fundraising activities required to sustain the project in the long term.

New Institutionalism was explored in this inquiry by moving away from the academic setting of the University Housed arts centre to establish a curatorial praxis that worked created discourse with artists, academics, members of the public, and local authority officials to display work in a less formal locations such as market stall gallery or empty shop gallery format. The exhibitions were further explored in those locations via public seminars, where artists and curatorial staff engaged in discussion with members of our local community about the underlying research, the display space became a dialogical environment. Meltzer suggests that in such circumstance the display space begins to be re-mediated in dialogical terms that go beyond purely visual discourse:

It's spatial choreography gives rise to a syntax. Experience and perception are translated into linguistic expression. Thus, the act of exhibiting has close ties with the communicative activity of

⁴² In 2007 Montmann wrote *'The Rooseum is becoming a branch of the expanding Moderna Museet in Stockholm; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo has been merged with other national museums in Oslo under the umbrella of the National Museum for Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design; Vilnius is suffering from severe budget cuts; in several places curators and directors have been replaced, which has a huge impact on the programmatic approach of the institutions, and in the case of NIFCA itself the institution has even been closed down.'*

organizing the show, and with texts and discussions. (Meltzer et al, 2013: 3)

The inquiry has shown that it is in these moments of shared encounter and public discourse, facilitated by all involved, the audience, the artist and the curator, that the curatorial research reaches an apex. It culminates in a process of informal learning and knowledge transfer where meanings and understandings are shared and created in a process of performative phronesis. María José Herrera notes that new institutionalism allows cultural producers to create new networks and break away from inherited dependencies:

The possibility of creating networks seems to be a better choice to foster collective, independent action; a better choice, definitely, than allowing art to depend on government officials appointed by the political administration in power at the different moments. (Herrera, no date: online)

The ideology of new institutionalism alludes to greater possibilities for the flattening of hierarchies between the institutions and the producers who collaborate within them. In theory artists, curators and participants have greater opportunities for self-management and setting their own agendas that avoid the instrumental effects of art by established institutions who may have programming, funding and audience development aims that differ from the agenda of the communities they purport to serve.

What the inquiry has shown is that possibilities for the future of our public spaces are not only constituted by the institution or the curator, instead the connections made in the curatorial process facilitate opportunities for audiences to constitute their own meanings from the collision of discourses offered by the curatorial programming and the artifacts brought forward by artists. Bismarck upholds this notion:

The possibilities for such connections are manifold...the materials assembled are 'in action': that is, they obtain changing and dynamic meanings in the course of the process of being related to one another (Bismarck, 2007:62-63).

Meta Bauer suggests that although anti-establishment art has not been in demand by institutions since the early 1970s, artists and curators have continued to ensure that subversive practices persist to be substantial drivers for much art practice, (Meta Bauer, 2007:291). In doing so this sphere of cultural work makes a small but significant contribution towards the re-imagining of the social order.

By challenging accepted norms and restructuring networks of power through the vehicle of exhibitions or interventions in the public realm artists and curatorial practitioners operate as, '*autonomous subject[s] of a critical civil society*' (ibid). Meta Bauer suggests that such actions are desirable for every individual, not just actors in the world of art.

The premise of this thesis has shown that the new institutional exhibition programme provides a platform or vehicle for new chain of cultural signifiers to reach new audiences outside of long established institutions.

At times I have been unsure that the notion of smuggling and the intention to build a more democratic and critical practice can work alongside one another. Importantly I came to understand that the PaR process has proved instructive in terms of highlighting/revealing the actual and potential creative, critical and ethical tensions between 'authorship' (curatorial practice) and democratic participatory artistic and cultural practices. Rather than thinking about this problem simply in terms of 'contradiction', it in fact reveals the usefulness of my praxical engagement in terms of a contribution to knowledge in the field. I realized that 'agency' is always and forever contingent. As demonstrated in the curatorial intervention I made with Kennedy's Facebook Top Trumps, the question I must continue to ask myself in future curatorial practice is whether 'smuggling' represents a form and level of coerciveness, so as to make it ethically questionable. In most cases it does not. If I felt that I was inadvertently attempting to retain a greater level of authorial control in the curatorial projects

in this inquiry I responded by discussing my plans openly with my colleagues. I was able to adapt my process along the way to open up processes to generate a more democratically participative practice and increase engagement with and discourse around contemporary arts practices with the community of collaborators I was working with. As an artist and curator/scholar, I am constantly negotiating the gap between 'the ideal' and 'the real'. In that sense, collaborative and community-led practices will necessarily contain many forms of compromise. This work has proved instructive in understanding the inter-relationship between 'the curatorial', 'community-based practices' and 'new institutionalism'.⁴³

The people who make up the experiencers in such community-based research are likely to be a different demographic to those who might venture onto the university campus and accordingly the works presented have different points of access. It is here that the curatorial researcher who operates through a model of new institutionalism can be seen to be smuggling knowledge; sharing it outside of the confines of the university context through the signifiers of an exhibition in a less formal space. Or otherwise, in collaboration with an artist such as Simon Kennedy who interrogates questions through the device of an origami tweet or sometimes even delivering it more formally via question and answer sessions with students or members of the public ushered into the counter-public space with a wave from the street. It is in this way that curatorial research can be disseminated in a more public (dare I say egalitarian) realm so that the hierarchies of institutionalism are flattened a little.

However, having smuggled myself, curator/scholar, into this community, other remnants were smuggled unintentionally, the notion that I had to change the design of my project to conform to MPhil-PhD requirements. The demands of writing a transitional report and to complete a mini-viva to defend the progress of the research operated as an academic marker that then changed the

⁴³ The realisations formulated in this section of the text arose in direct dialogue between myself and supervisor John Deeney July 2014

parameters of curatorial process. That the process of doing so forced me to concretize the practice against the intentions of my research design for operating through an intangible and performative process of becoming, I came to realise that as a scholarly-artist I was shackled to University agendas more tightly than I would have liked to imagine. I was not an independent artist-curator operating in the community in free flow.

Smuggling my work from inside the university to emerge outside into the community was only one part of the practice agenda, the work was still subject to accountability and was required to defend its validity in terms of research discourses. An interesting insight I revealed about my praxis and about the nature of academic research in the curatorial field is that by operating in a methodology of criticality it was crucial to the ethics of my practice that I must remain responsive to the communities I sought out along the way, to develop creative partnerships with mutual benefits based on trust required many months developing the administrative side of the project to operate sustainably.

That this work in the community developed at a slower timeframe than was legitimated by an academic framework of MPhil- PhD meant that my academic funding for the project was stopped one year into the project as the time consuming responsibilities of relationship building with community stakeholders meant that I hadn't developed far enough to defend it successfully in academic terms to progress to PhD level study. The early end to the project revealed important insights that were not clear to me at the outset and that I hope will aid other curatorial researchers who may read this study before embarking on similar projects.

Operating in a mode of smuggling in curatorial praxis resisted some of the norms and regulations of the university protocols. My methodologies for the shape that research is conveyed through informal discourse that resists methods of documentation such as recording or transcription and in this way smuggling operates as a form of institutional critique. It is sometimes developed through a non linear, fuzzy 'criticality' rather than delivering more concrete forms of

knowledge but this proves difficult to demonstrate so smuggling currently proves problematic in an academic arena.

A number of questions emerged to be exploring such as the complexities and conflicts of interest that arise from short-term collaborative relationships. How can universities and researchers better prepare to ensure the sustainability of such projects? What happens to the publics created once the temporal involvement of researchers such as myself are withdrawn or suspended if the research project loses institutional support? Are University support systems effectively in place to ensure that community arts researcher-led projects are ethically managed? How do I, as a research practitioner involved in a process of 'smuggling' best resolve my obligations between the University and the community of practice?

In responding to those questions in dialogue with the research institute I was able to demonstrate my obligations to the community project and the University supported me for an extra six months to allow a sustainable handover to other community members so that the project could continue beyond my involvement and also to allow time to finalise my academic work. I posit that this handover period was significant to good practice in community curatorial work and during that time I assisted with the business planning and recruiting of a new director for the project and organized a community forum to evaluate and create new plans for the project moving forward.⁴⁴

Despite its academic tensions, the project was a success within the community of Northwich. During its tenure in two different pop up galleries VAC gallery held 16 exhibitions and had thousands of visitors. By smuggling a curated and creative interface, and by creating a cultural structure into the Northwich high street we actively created a new type of public space in the declining town centre. We invited exhibiting artists into the community space, to deliver public

⁴⁴ See Appendix for documentation showing the minutes of the community forum meeting.

seminars to share insights into their practice, so that the people could discuss the work exhibited, so that it could be debated, explained and dissected in encounters both formal and informal. This wasn't artwork created for a community to ameliorate some heinous social problem, as Claire Bishop critiques. Rather, it was an intervention by members of the local community, who harnessed the means of production to address a perceived lack of cultural infrastructure. My role as curatorial smuggler was in effect to act as an interface between the academy, my fellow activists, artists and the new art audiences we created.

I left the project in an official capacity in January 2014 to concentrate on completing my MPhil qualification. My last intervention was to organize a public forum to locate a new director and to reaffirm that ownership of the project lies with its community of users. Despite a public campaign to continue the project in it's location⁴⁵, three months later the new directors decided not to renew the second VAC Gallery lease due to the prohibitive cost of the local authority rent and rates.

The premises have now closed and sadly been empty for three years because the council did not want to set a precedent for subsidising rent on a long term basis. The VAC gallery team have begun formulating a more nomadic format, something they resisted but that I strongly advocated for before leaving the project as a nomadic approach suits new institutional practice better and allowing time to focus on developing work with artists and accessing project focused funding streams rather than the work involved in maintaining a premises. I hope to continue to work with them as an independent curator and the freedom of not working as an 'adjunct-curator' to VAC or the University should be an interesting departure from work undertaken so far. Work to be

⁴⁵ Regular member of the VAC art community Charlotte Peters Rock addressed full Cheshire West and Chester Council to address the issue of VAC Gallery closure to see if anything could be done. Councillor Julia Tickridge also raised a question about the gallery's fate. Ultimately the gallery was given a short extension to their lease but the terms proved too expensive to sustain tenure. See appendices for minutes of Julia Tickridge's question and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pChkhLgtTwU&feature=youtu.be> for a video of Charlotte Peters Rock's question.

done now is to remodel the constraints of the empty shop model, reliant on local authority support and university supported/validated forms of new institutionalism. My challenge as an independent researcher is to continue to create opportunities for the formation of new dialogic communities outside of the empty shop framework, to present work in doctors surgeries and bus stops, pubs, market stalls and bingo halls. To continue to address the community of experiencers we have nurtured in Northwich through the accessible format of the VAC empty shop gallery by engaging them in new and more challenging dialogic spaces and to extend our reach whilst maintaining the self reflexivity and inquiring format of an academic practice to engage new audiences simultaneously.

The research project has shown that for the curatorial smuggler the impetus of the term, the curatorial, moves beyond the curation, production and organisation of other artist's works in an exhibition context. It is often a process led system of mediation where contemporary art is contextualised with socio-political concerns. When engaged in the act of smuggling then, the artist/curator develops a curatorial praxis, a space where embodied knowledge is formed in a de-centered approach focusing on piecing together disparate elements of cultural phenomena within a particular temporal framework where new perceptions can be formed and applied directly in the development of work. I proposed the term smuggling, as a descriptor of a phenomenological experience, to denote the overlaps in knowledge encounters occurring in the multitude of interactions triggered within the process, where council representatives, the local MP and fellow collaborators could be considered essential interlocutors as much as the more general expected interlocutors of the curatorial process, i.e. The exhibition viewing art gallery public.

To conclude, the praxis has shown that smuggling, as mode of curatorial intervention is pertinent because it lends authority to the process of setting cultural ideas in motion in an open ended and embodied form of institutional criticality. My proposition is not necessarily that smuggling outmodes other

concepts in the curatorial field (performativity, relational aesthetics, etc.). However, it has shown that the notion of smuggling provides us with a critical term for a particular mode of practice where curatorial research is undertaken at the interstice of both academic and professional based practice and can reveal aspects of curatorial practice that would otherwise remain hidden. In particular the term illustrates the surreptitious nature of curatorial negotiation as it emerges in the flows of civic networks. In summary, a practical application of the aesthetic concept of smuggling is better able to discuss with rigor, the intricate navigation of the curator through a territory of connected institutions and systems and guide in the understanding of the ethical implications of engaging at the interstice of agendas between the curator, artists and audience participants and the different types of institutions that they inhabit.

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Art Gallery Opens With Letters From The Past 11 February 2013
http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10220616.Art_gallery_opens_with_letters_from_the_past/

VAC Gallery To Close 21 March 2014

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/11093682.VAC_Gallery_to_close/

Artists Unite to Open Gallery 24 January 2013
http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10176845.Artists_unite_to_open_gallery/

Woodturners and Mini Art Exhibiti at Gallery

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New Exhibition Brings Eastern Flavour To Northwich 3 September 2013

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10650134.New_exhibition_brings_eastern_flavour_to_Northwich/

Gallery Hosts Small Mythologies For The New Era 29th July 13

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Putting On A Good Sew 9th January 2014

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10926964.Putting_on_a_good_sew/

Reprieve For Gallery 17th Dec 2013

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10881732.Reprieve_for_gallery/

Fashionistas Help Dress A Girl Around The World 5th Dec 13

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10854972.Fashionistas_help_Dress_a_Girl_Around_the_World/

Gallery's Global Dress Making 14th Sept 13

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10674608.Gallery_s_global_dressmaking/

Art Gallery Needs New Home 21 March 13

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10301321.Art_gallery_needs_a_new_home/

Northwich Calendar Launched in Town Centre Gallery 4th November 2013

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10783489.Northwich_calendar_launched_in_town_centre_gallery/#

Youtube links:

Feasibility Study and re-imagining the Verdin Technical Schools building art school

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrXlIqa0awQ&t=114s>

Small Mythologies For The New Era – Public Talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNVoSddPfpo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2n6BU8RrNV0&t=87s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19ApBo9Eqjs&t=26s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNVoSddPfpo>

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBYOEKuu-Lc&t=794s>

Emma Thackham Interviews with Jane Fairhurst in her studio

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErtUf25hQ-U>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ge0wIVgt_E

Artists exchanging ideas and information at VAC Gallery

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glk6oIVx-cM>

VAC Gallery Promo Video by Mid Cheshire College Student Emily Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihdErfl3-Xs>

The Lightfoot Letters Exhibition at VAC pop up gallery filmed by Alan Carr

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpHgzas-qSA&t=378s>

The Lightfoot Letter – Poetry Film by Angela Topping

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOkBlbE_m88&t=241s

Angela Topping reads The Lightfoot Letters at VAC pop up gallery opening

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgWL07--Z7k>

Conference Presentation

Thackham, Emma, 14th September 2012 ***‘Contemporary curating in a community context’*** Manchester Metropolitan University Centenary Celebrations, Manchester Metropolitan University Cheshire Campus, Crewe Green Rd, Crewe, Cheshire.

Appendices

Included in the appendices are a number of documents that help to demonstrate the process of the research praxis. Exploratory praxical projects that led to the development of a curatorial strategy for Northwich are included here. They include a short summary or evaluations and documents demonstrating additional discourse generated between myself and some of the artists and gallery visitors.

Appendix 1.

Manchester Metropolitan University Centenary Celebrations Friday 14th September 2012

Event Title: A Showcase of Community Engagement

A celebratory session to highlight the community engagement work of MMUC, especially that of postgraduate students and staff; it focuses on the way in which universities can 'reach out' to make a difference to their localities. This day symposium invites practitioners, professionals, current, former and potential students, to hear about the work within the Faculty and how the University can help with supporting communities. We invite all those interested in communities and social issues to come along. The session is hosted by the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University Cheshire in Wilson 0-18 on the Crewe campus. It is free to attend with refreshments and evening buffet

Schedule

2 - 2.15 pm	<i>Welcome and refreshments:</i> <i>'Community Engagement as the Third Mission of UK Universities: MMUC's contribution' (Geraldine Lee-Treweek)</i>
2.30	<i>Fiona Burgess, Student Enterprise - 'What difference can students make to local communities?'</i>
2.50	<i>Kim Heyes - 'Exploring what kind of support mental health service users need for community engagement'</i>
3.10	<i>Marcin Marcinkiewicz - 'Migrant volunteering in Cheshire, reaching out'</i>
3.30	<i>Geraldine Lee-Treweek - 'Schools Stand up 2 Racism'</i>
3.50	<i>Milka Podsiedlik - 'Supporting Diverse Communities in Crewe'</i>
3.50-4.20	<i>Coffee/Tea break</i>
4.20pm	<i>Emma Thackham - 'Contemporary curating in a community context'</i>
4.40	<i>Rob Allen and Linda Reichenfeld - 'KTP and sharing projects between universities and third sector organisations'</i>

- 5.10 Loreen Chikwira - 'What we know about Zimbabwean women migrants in the UK: what kind of difference can research make to a hidden community?'
- 5.30 Stefan Pritchard – 'Evaluating inclusion: Parental views and influencing factors on inclusion in physical activity sessions'
- 5.50 Ornette Clennan - '**How music-led projects can connect communities. A project**', initiated by Carola Boehm

6.pm - 6.30 Buffet and refreshments

6.40 - 8pm Panel discussion - Looking Forwards to The next 100 Years of Working with Communities'

8pm Close and invitation to join the partnership working research group.

Attendance List

Name	Organisation/Affiliation
Rob Allen	Director of Partnerships Wulvern Housing, MMUC MSc Management Studies Student
Karolina Ayers	MMU Cheshire, Doctoral Candidate (IDS)
Jo Bailey	MMU Cheshire, Doctoral Candidate (IDS)
Fiona Burgess	Masters Research Student (IDS)
Graham Bushell	The Oakhanger Project Nr. Crewe and Alsager
Loreen Chikwira	MMU Cheshire, Doctoral Candidate (IDS)
Dawn Clark	Cheshire East Council
Ornette Clennan	MMUC Contemporary Arts Faculty Member
Ewa Duda-Mikulin	Doctoral Candidate Department of Social Policy, Salford University And EUROPA, Manchester
Hillary Hamilton	Director, Wishing Well Project, Crewe
Kim Heyes	MMU Cheshire, Doctoral Candidate (IDS)
Ceri Hodgkinson	LIFT Project (Let's Improve Our Future Together) Crewe
Aneta Jackowska-Musiol	Derby University Student
Kathy Kinmond	MMU Cheshire, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty Member
Geraldine Lee-Treweek	MMU Cheshire, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty Member
Marcin Marcinkiewicz	Masters Advanced Practitioner (Abuse Studies) Student, Community Development Worker (Lift Project, Crewe)
Orlagh McCabe	MMU Cheshire, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty Member

<i>Lisa Oakley</i>	<i>MMU Cheshire, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty Member</i>
<i>Tim Oakley</i>	<i>Christians Against Poverty, West Street, Crewe</i>
<i>Donna Perry</i>	<i>Cheshire Centre for Independent living</i>
<i>Milka Podseidlik</i>	<i>Masters Advanced Practitioner (Public, Community and Voluntary Sector Studies) Student; Pathways Project Worker, Crewe</i>
<i>Stefan Pritchard</i>	<i>MMUC Recent Graduate, Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>
<i>Linda Reichenfeld</i>	<i>MMU Cheshire, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty Member</i>
<i>Emma Thackham</i>	<i>MMU Cheshire, Doctoral Candidate (CA)</i>
<i>Joss West-Burnham</i>	<i>MMU Cheshire, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty Member</i>
<i>Emily Williams</i>	<i>LIFT Project (Let's Improve Our Future Together), Crewe</i>
<i>Sebastian Wojszwillo</i>	<i>Independent Translator, Manchester</i>
<i>Catherine Wright</i>	<i>Masters Advanced Practitioner (Abuse Studies) Student</i>

Appendix 2. Report Flout Exhibition



Fig 44. Image shows part of the Flout Exhibition in The Axis Open Space

FLOUT was held at The Axis Open Space, Axis Arts Centre, Manchester Metropolitan University 19th – 30th September 2011 and was a group exhibition of sculpture, installation & performative intervention exploring identity as constructed within the flux of contemporary societies. Exhibiting Artists included Aliyah Hussain, Axelle Russo, Emma Thackham, Helen Gorrill, Hilary Jack, Jayne Lawless, Lauren O Grady, Nicola Hands, Rebecca Gamble and Wendy Mayer.

The works reflected my research interests into the impact of western culture on feminine identity. My curatorial practice directly informs my visual live/art practice and a developing interest in visual anthropology. The works selected had a feminist aesthetic and each had a performative potential



Fig.45 Axelle Russo's sculptural works in Flout exhibition

The cohesive element that united these works was an exploration of absurdity within contemporary art and culture. Whether employing typography and iconography creating strong visual metaphors such as those present within in Axelle Russo's *I Can't Breathe* (2006) from her Burka series or in Nicola Hands' *Who Taught You To Hate Yourself?* (2010), these works were designed to evoke discourse about identity amongst the largely student visitor.

Fig 46 .Axelle Russo: *I Can't Breathe* Sculptural Textile Intervention (2010)



In more subtle exploratory performative interventions, such as in Aliyah Hussain's *Ceremony* (2011) these works mapped relationships between the familiar and the obscure whilst employing strategies of distortion to upturn iconography to encourage viewers to question the impermanence and mutability of cultural convention.

In Russo's installation a faceless figure is draped head to toe in Burka made from material of the American flag. It stands on a nest-like bed of sticks reminiscent of

cub-scout bonfire. I want to spend time in dialogue with the artist, the work and with viewers to discuss the effect on the viewer. There were strong reactions to the piece. One visitor wrote feedback in the visitor book stating that to put the American Flag on a bonfire was racist. I didn't read the piece that way at all. The opposite in fact, I felt like the artist was more likely referring to the xenophobic behaviour of mainstream media in the fall out from the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. When Jayne Lawless encased a suitcase in red gloss railings, and suspended it from the roof I was interested to learn about what the image implied and what the viewer perceived? I was resident throughout the exhibition in order to debate such ideas with the students and learn about the different discourses the work evoked.



Fig 47. Nicola Hands, *Who Taught You To Hate Yourself?* (2010)

Seeing a still from Nicola Hand's "*Who taught you to hate yourself*" caused a reaction or performative impulse to occur within me in a process that I have identified as phronesis a practical and embodied form of knowledge, her insight and creative response to research interests I have been exploring within my own

practice was compelling and the exhibition allowed me time and space to discuss the work with her, with an audience and develop and also to create a creative response in my own practice.

Evaluation.

Flout was the first exhibition I curated during this research inquiry and was intended to reach a specifically academic audience, namely to engage the first year undergraduates in discussion of issues in contemporary visual art. The subject matter was provocative and was successful as an intervention in the Axis Open Space, a foyer space of the Axis Arts Centre which is housed in the Department for Contemporary Art at Manchester Metropolitan University: Cheshire. However, I found the level of engagement with artists did not allow me enough creative input, despite that these works were as Beatrice von Bismarck describes in 'action', that is, the materials assembled obtained dynamic meanings from the connections and aesthetic features brought through by their association with one another in the same exhibition space, (Bismarck:2007:62) these were works that had been created in isolation outside of the exhibition context, the dialogue I had with the artists was in the course of putting the programme together and at the end of the exhibition when we had a seminar exchange where with an invited audience we examined many of the issues contained within the works. There were many interjections where content crossed over between works and they worked together as a cohesive curatorial intervention in the Axis Open Space. However, in reflection I've come to realise that for this project to have had greater use for the wider research inquiry I would have required a greater level of engagement with the artists over the creation of the works.

Appendix 2 Evaluation Report of Unexpected Sites Performance Installation Project



Fig. 48 Photograph taken of a friend I made at the OCEAN Caribbean Craft Coffee Morning group

The Up the Wall project developed through a commission from Jodie Gibson, Axis Arts Centre's Community Outreach & Development Director. I was interested to extend my practice to engage within local communities and Gibson introduced me to the community group OCEAN (Organisation for the Care of Ethnic and All Nations). I had been engaging in dialogue with community members there, dropping in to their Caribbean group of knitting circle and craft coffee mornings.



Fig. 49 Photograph taken of a friend I made at the OCEAN Caribbean Craft Coffee Morning group

I'd been particularly interested to learn about the experiences of the older generation of ladies who first came to live in Britain from various Caribbean islands in the 1960s and the ladies shared many stories with me and one particular story about how unprepared for Great Britain's cold weather led to me embodying a character wearing only a red 1960s summer dress from one of the ladies stories of her arrival in Britain for the performance at Up the Wall.



Fig. 50

Mushroom

Sculpture created during sensory art works shop at Springfield School.

As part of the compositional strategy for Unexpected Sites I delivered sensory art Candyfloss sculpture workshop at Springfield School in order to engage in informal discourse with the students about memory and identity and to test the limitations of candyfloss as a potential medium for creating art works.



Fig. 51 A student attempts to roll candyfloss onto a stick during the sensory art workshop while I supervise.

I first met the young people from Springbank School when Jodie Gibson, Axis Arts Centre community outreach director Axis Arts Centre invited them to visit the Memory B(l)anks exhibition I curated at the Axis Open Space in June 2011. They were particularly interested in the work of Fiona Hughes who presented her piece Preserved Memories from Home. This was an archive of detritus left over from in between moving homes inspired by the destruction of her childhood home in an Indonesian civil war. As part of the commission Springfield and I continued working with memory archives and when Jodie suggested this project it seemed perfect to continue in dialogue with both of these groups. I worked with Springfield students in a candyfloss sensory sculpture workshop. The term 'Brown Sugar' had been identified with the ladies at OCEAN as a term used to describe slaves who were thrown overboard from slave ships (because they were ill and dying because of terrible conditions). They were then referred to as destroyed Brown Sugar in captain's cargo logs in order that they could claim insurance for their loss of income. I decided that sugar would be an interesting material to work with in an installation because of the historic significance of the material but also because of its mutability. The workshops were intended to result in a finished product that could be recreated in a sculptural installation for the *Up The Wall* festival but we soon realised the limitations of working with candyfloss, it would disintegrate after only half an hour when exposed to the air. Instead I proposed to play a game in a performance installation where I would create candyfloss within my installation and tempt the onlooker to come and have an interpersonal exchange with me in order to receive it. In doing so I utilised sugar candyfloss as a commodity but its exchange value remained ambiguous. The work was first conceptualised in the workshops with Springfield school and the onlooker completed the work through their participation.

The site for *Up The Wall* at Chester Castle straddled the border ground of England and Wales and I was asked by *Chester Performs* the producer of the event to develop a connection with a group or individual in North Wales. I suggested working with creative writer Gem Harding (based in North Wales) because the thematics of borders and identity come through strongly within her

filmic practice as she is confined within the borders of her body due to an aggressive illness. My work with Gem consisted of multiple dialogues at her home in North Wales where we discussed the installation and themes such as memory, identity, suicide, death, depression and coping strategies she has developed to deal with the pain of her illness. This included a session where we discussed how she creates the image of a box to project her pain into. This led to my acquisition of the metal boxes for the installation that young people at Springfield used for their memory archive. Dialogue with Gem Harding was important as a compositional strategy for the installation and my creative response as an artist. Harding's film was projected onto the wall of the castle as I performed.



Fig. 52 This image shows Gem Harding's film *Insomnia* projected onto the Chester Castle wall as I pass candyfloss to an audience participant during my performance installation *Unexpected Sites* at Up The Wall 2011. Poor quality image due to it being pitch black except for my installation lighting.

Evaluation of *Unexpected Sites* Project

The process of creating an artistic response to working with three different community groups was most challenging. The problematic of working with three groups so disparate was that the dynamic of the groups did not facilitate working together, the borders between groups was further defined through physical and geographical limitations. This meant that my response was abstracted to a greater extent than usual and the involvement with the groups had in large parts been a dialogic process rather than a traditional art workshop process.

The development process involved a large number of different people, which altered the authorship of the work. Ownership and authorship are constantly in flux, as are the roles of artist, curator and spectator/participant. This is especially the case when working within interdisciplinary mediums and crossing the visual/live art divide.

Soon after making first contact with the groups it emerged that they wouldn't be able to attend the evening performance of *Up The Wall* which took place for one night only. This altered my ideas for the project and I decided to make a live art performance in response to the sessions I would undertake with them in the compositional stage. At this early stage of the research project my ideas about criticality and smuggling had only just begun to form and this process help me find the insight that I didn't not feel comfortable having so much authorial control about the outcome of the project.



Fig. 53 Image showing my performance installation at Chester Castle for the Up The Wall art festival October 2011. I am wearing a red dress, a symbol of the summer dresses by women of the Caribbean summer dress worn on their journeys to the UK from the Caribbean identified as a significant memory of their first experiences the cold UK climate during discussions at OCEAN.

I intended for authorship to remain open to negotiation within my practice but here I felt that because there was a final product, a performance installation with me inhabiting the role of artist, my response was not representational enough of the participatory, process of making the work. I realized that my ongoing practice must remain more fluid. I wanted to focus more on exploring the methodology of the curatorial process than on end points. The question of authorship is something that I constantly return to and question within my curatorial practice.

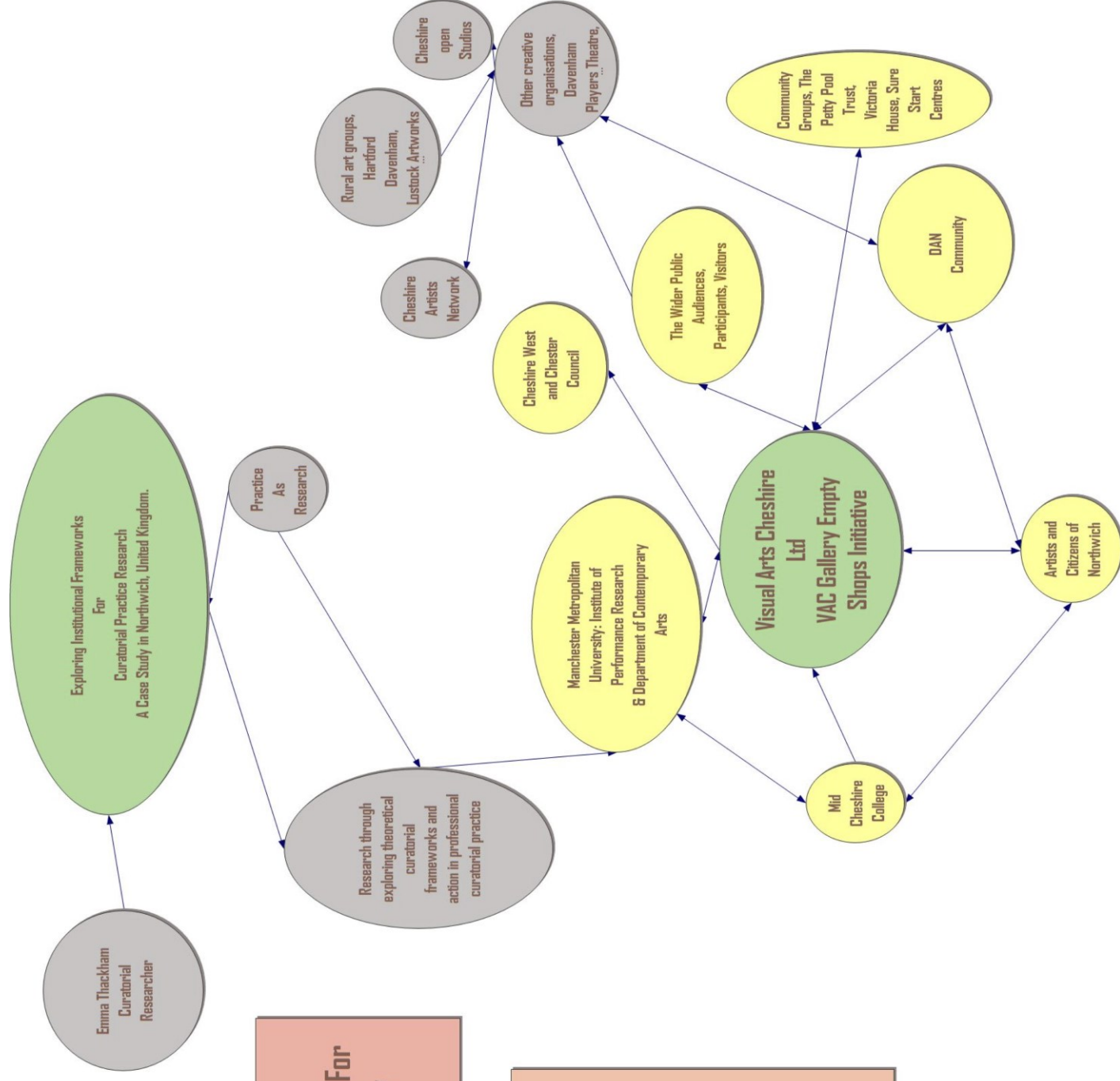
Appendix 3 (see Fig. 54 next page)

A framework diagram to demonstrate some of the institutional networks I explored as the inquiry established itself in Northwich

Institutional Framework For The Research Inquiry

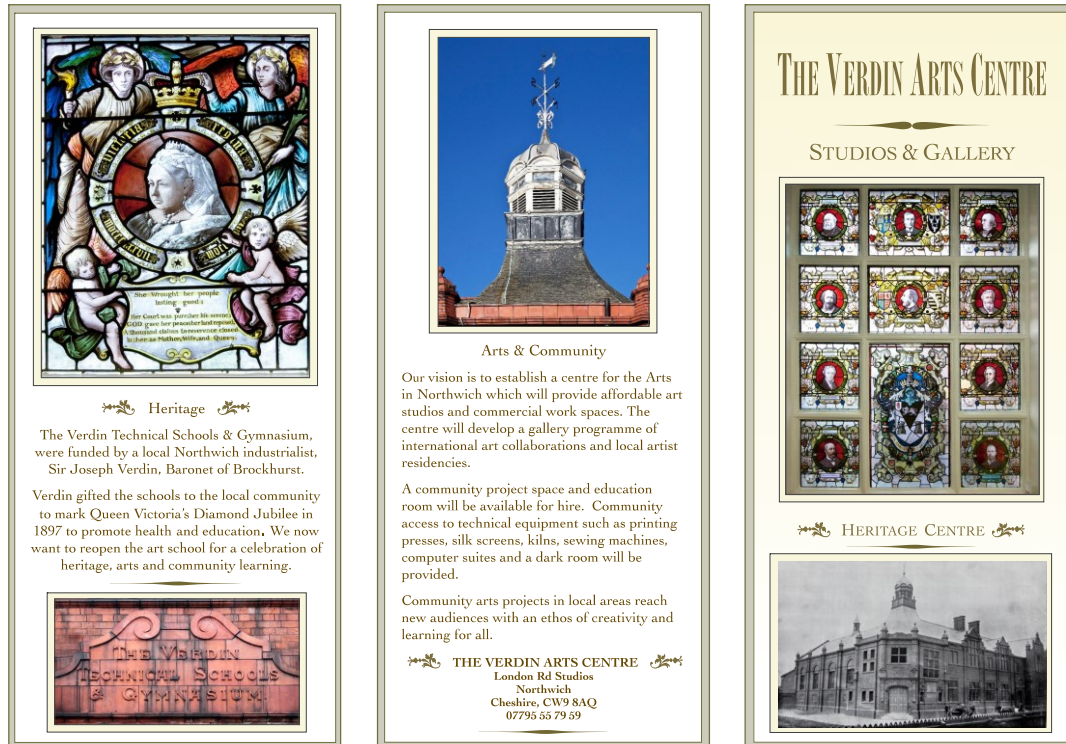
With the closure of Memorial Hall community space and London Rd Art Studios in Northwich, I perceived a gap in cultural infrastructure that would provide space to develop a curatorial practice research inquiry. In this research year, since January I have formulated a response to this context that would work with other local citizens to explore the possibility for a nomadic arts centre drawing from new institutional theoretical influences.

By establishing a new artist co-operative, Visual Arts Cheshire Ltd, to provide a framework for this exploration we have not only built a strong network of amateur and professional artists and engaged new audiences for visual arts in Northwich but have also begun to construct a dialogic platform for mutual support between multiple institutional partners such as Development of the Arts in Northwich, Cheshire Open Studios, Cheshire West And Chester Council, Manchester Metropolitan University and other community partners such as The PettyPool Trust and Sure Start. Not only that, we have played a part in the regeneration and social cohesion of Northwich by creating a community-led creative and cultural hub utilising empty shop gallery spaces that draws visitors into the heart of Northwich Town. The research inquiry builds a contextual ground to expose the struggles and tensions faced by the curatorial researcher as she navigates a professional practice from within this complex web of institutional and non-institutional inter-relationships.



Appendix 4 Brochure

As part of a steering committee attempting to buy former art college, The Verdin Technical Schools and Gymnasium, to preserve its use in the community in Northwich. I created this brochure to distribute to local artists, members of the public and council officials to showcase a new vision for the building as the VERDIN ART CENTRE and to generate their support.



Appendix 5 Proposal Ruth Dillon – Knowledge Transfer Project

I worked with Artist Ruth Dillon who responded to my artist call, *Long Live The Institution!* to create a project proposal exploring new-institutionalism by re-imagining the use of the art centre. As well as creating community custodians for the building, the proposal was that the project would form part of a Knowledge Transfer Project with Manchester Metropolitan University. The project remained unrealised as the building was soon after sold to developers.

Project Proposal *Community Custodians*

Interdisciplinary art project. Comprising community workshops, photographic and sculptural intervention residencies: photographic archive and research development responding to the Verdin/ London Road project.

Residency to explore collective notions of identity in a postmodern society.

Overall project Aims:

- * Create art works that and are inspired and in response to the Town's and celebrate peoples history.
- * Engage communities, through workshops. The emphasis is on creating cultural custodians within the community. Working with groups or local residents to create a sense of ownership with solid outcomes that will create a legacy of both safeguarding the building's heritage and preserving it via community engagement.
- * Widening participation and creating a living community legacy, by encouraging new talent to explore art practices within the context with the support of experienced artists.

Impact on Art: explorations of praxis.

Aside from research and development, we believe that there is an extra value within the workshop aspect of this project for artists exclusively related to content strategy for audience engagement. The transmission of knowledge needs three distinct factors, local knowledge holders, disciples or individuals and communities keen to learn, and communities that value knowledge transmission. To engage the potential cultural custodians and a diverse new audience, I will be committed to engaging groups in three stages:

- 1, Discovery
- 2, Experience
- 3, Exploration

For a solid legacy to be created these stages are vital. Failure to acknowledge these stages would be erroneous. We believe that whilst the ongoing research and development process for artists is of upmost importance, it needs to be married with a realistic creative partnership that lies within the community.

Objectives of workshops:

- 1) Seek recognition of the heritage value of the Verdin building by:
 - beginning a photographic inventory of the building
 - disseminate information via sessional workshops
 - create new cultural custodians
- 2) Raise profile and awareness of the Verdin Arts Centre project by:
 - celebrating the history of the town and its people
 - exploring identity of the past, present and potential future

3) Begin to safeguard and document important cultural artefacts, with an emphasis on the future collection holding an extra value relating to fine art photography and living history by:

creating a digitalized collection of the heritage assets to be used for the purposes of conservation and preservation of the building.

Summary action plan:

Consultation and planning	October-November 2012
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Agree objectives with VAC	October-November 2012
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Visit VAC and groups	November 2012
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Residency begins	December 2012
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Sessional workshops	December 2012
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Exhibit works	December- January 2012
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Finance:

Normal residency costs	£250.00 full day
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Travel and accommodation member of LRP)	(Petrol costs or train and could stay with a
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Materials for Exhibition	(Dependant upon your budget, normal print cost for C types 12x 18 approx 10.00 = £240 with frames and mounts approx £480 approximation).
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website: <http://www.ruthdillonmedia.com/RuthDillonmedia.com/Home.html>

Appendix 6 - Expression of Interest Form KTP

I've included a copy of the Expression of Interest Form for Knowledge Transfer Partnership between the VAC steering committee and Manchester Metropolitan University because demonstrates one of the many administrative tasks I undertook as part of the curatorial process and also demonstrates part of my concept for smuggling my art out of the university to begin curating knowledge directly within the community. I worked on this project for 4months.

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE BUSINESS AND KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

Before completing this form, you need to be sure that the proposed Knowledge Transfer Partnership meets the overarching criteria for KTP set out in Annex 1 and read carefully the guidance notes attached to this form.

The purpose of the Expression of Interest is to describe briefly WHAT is proposed by the Partnership; demonstrating the level of innovation, impact and challenge for each partner, and that the proposed project(s) fits the overarching criteria for KTP (Annex 1) and any criteria of selected funding organisations.

1.1	Knowledge Base Partner	
	Department Name	
	Lead Academic Name	
1.2a	Registered Name (<i>not the Trading Name</i>) of the Business Partner	Visual Art Cheshire
1.2b	Town	Northwich
	Post Code	

	Business Contact name	Emma Thackham	
	Contact Telephone and email	07795557959 <u>emmathackham@me.com</u>	
1.3a	If the Business Partner is part of a Group, what is the name of the ultimate Parent Group?		
1.3b	Total Number of FTE Employees in the Company	3	
1.3c	Total Number of FTE Employees in the Group		
1.4	Company location at which the Associate(s) will be working	Town	Northwich
		Post Code	CW8 8AQ
1.5a	Number of Associates	1	
1.5b	Estimated project duration	24-36 Months	
1.5c	Estimated grant amount		
1.6	Planned submission date of full proposal (mm/yyyy)		
1.7	Set out the aim of the proposed KTP and its purpose, in no more than 25 words starting with the words “To..... “ (<i>This description will be used on the public website to describe the project</i>)		
	To manage the start-up of a sustainable, visual arts and heritage centre. To establish a community based research centre for socially engaged arts practice.		

1.8	Outline the company's business, clearly stating its revenue generating activities (or funding sources if not yet generating revenues), in no more than 100 words
	<p>This innovative visual arts centre will preserve the heritage of The Verdin Technical Schools and Gymnasium. Contributing to local history, conservation, tourism, community engagement, regeneration, education, employment, social policy and inclusion and groundbreaking research on socially engaged arts practices. The building is large and revenues will be achieved through commercial leases, artists' studio rent, workshops, lectures and demonstrations, gallery commissions, hire fees for community rooms, visiting artist fees for national and international residencies, artist exhibition submission fees and partnerships with local schools and colleges. Other sources of revenue income will come from private investment, government and charitable grants.</p>

1.9a	Explain the knowledge and capability that the business is seeking to develop, and why it is both innovative and strategically important in no more than 150 words
	<p>The business requires a KTP associate with business, marketing and financial planning knowledge to assist with the start up and regeneration of an empty decaying building building it into a sustainable arts and heritage centre that would attract local and international visitors and have social and cultural impact in the local economy. It is strategically important as there is demand for the facility in the area, there is nothing similar in Cheshire. The building is listed on the town plan but is not currently a listed building. Parts of the centre would be community led and open to all. The KTP associate will help to implement this innovative community led management. The centre will attract both nationally and internationally acclaimed artists that will attract an international audience ensuring quality and efficiency of the cultural stock. The implementation</p>

	<p>of a community based academic research centre is innovative and will break down barriers between local communities and academia.</p>
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1.9b	<p>List the key stages of work to be carried out, in no more than 100 words</p> <p>The first stage to be established is acquisition of the building this will involve the continuation of building partnerships with local partners such as arts development officers, heritage advisors, councillors, MP's, local businesses, government agencies and voluntary professionals and consultants.</p> <p>This will happen by securing grants to fund a feasibility study to demonstrate need. Stage one will result in applications to the Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council England, Big Lottery Fund and other grant providers. A strategy to attract private investors needs to be established.</p> <p>The second stage is the implementation of effective public engagement, building relationships with communities finding strategies to engage them in the partnership for a sustainable ongoing relationship.</p>
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1.10a	<p>Outline the potential impact of the new knowledge and expertise on the commercial, social and/or cultural development of the business, sector and UK/region in no more than 150 words.</p> <p>The regeneration of this heritage asset and the implementation of a community based research centre will create an innovative opportunity for the sharing of knowledge between academics, community custodians, arts centre, artists and schools. This will impact on well-being and quality of life in the local community. The partnership engages with communities at risk of social exclusion creating university links and socially engaged arts research practitioners will utilise innovative creative means to help to raise academic aspirations and teach new skills in the local area.</p> <p>The partnership will provide local jobs helping employment, social and economic regeneration. Heritage architects recruited from within the region will advise on the preservation and conservation of the building. A sustainable arts centre will increase visitor numbers to the</p>
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	<p>region, impacting on tourism, attracting artists nationally and internationally. The arts centre management team and franchisees offering café facilities etc. will be sourced from the local community will share knowledge and will employ and train individuals at risk of social exclusion demonstrating best practice in socially engaged arts management.</p>
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1.10 b	<p>For Large companies, outline the involvement of, and impact on, the SMEs in your supply chain, in no more than 50 words.</p>
1.11 a	<p>Outline (i) the contribution of the academic team to the proposed project; (ii) the opportunities and challenges it presents to the team; and (iii) the impact on the institution's research and teaching, in no more than 250 words.</p>

	<p>The academic team would provide strategic advice and guidance for the project. Research knowledge of different business ‘models’ as examples of good practice would also aid the partnership to avoid any pitfalls. There would be opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration that would share knowledge and expertise providing opportunities for new insights to occur. The academic team would bring their vast knowledge and expertise with references to appropriate reading material and could stimulate further stakeholder partnerships that would further the research.</p> <p>The major challenge is to establish an arts centre that is sustainable and to embed a university research centre off campus in the heart of a local community. The partnership would develop a working case study that would provide invaluable student placements for future generations of both undergraduate and postgraduate researchers.</p> <p>The partnership will help to raise the profile of Manchester Metropolitan University as a leading provider of collaborative public engagement projects. Documentation collected throughout the partnership will be published bringing in further publicity, revenues and media opportunities that will further disseminate the knowledge generated. The partnership will raise aspirations in the local community and set an example for similar projects of asset transfer and community enterprise. Knowledge and experience will be shared with other universities and can be transferred to other communities. The partnership experience will create entrepreneurial opportunities and this will impact directly on the local and national economy.</p>
1.11 b	<p>Identify any relevant <u>direct or indirect links</u> between this project and previous Research Council or other public funding organisation support for the academic team or for the Business Partner. Identify the relevance to the project of each award in no more than 25 words (naming academics where relevant).</p>

	Funding details and relevance	Date	Grant Reference
	Emma Thackham (MMU and VAC) AHRC Research Preparation Masters Award	2009-2011	
	Emma Thackham (MMU and VAC) PhD Studentship Award	2011-2014	

Appendix 7 - History of VAC, Visual Arts Cheshire Chairman - Alan Carr

Visual Arts Cheshire – the early days in Brunner Court

When the Verdin Technical School project ceased to be an option, the three founder members decided that VAC would continue with the aim of opening a gallery in Northwich town centre. We changed our name from Verdin Arts Centre to Visual Arts Cheshire (retaining the VAC acronym).

Emma Thackham, Gill Snowball and Alan Carr negotiated a tenancy in empty council offices at Brunner Court, which we turned into gallery space by carpeting, painting and installing lighting. Emma was responsible for securing and curating our initial exhibition – the prestigious ‘Lightfoot Letters’. This was a collaboration between the artist Maria Walker and the poet Angela Topping. ‘The Lightfoot Letters’ opened in February, 2013 (700 visitors in its 5 week run) the first event in a 3 month exhibition programme which finished with a very well attended Open Exhibition (1200 visitors in 4 weeks).

We were then forced to move out of the gallery because the council had leased it to a rent paying tenant. We were offered a nearby unit (a closed health food shop) in the same complex. With the help of volunteers we transformed the tired space by carpeting, plastering, painting and lighting etc.

Exhibitions ran from June 2013 until its close in March 2014 (when the council were asking us to pay a higher rent than we could afford).

During our stay in Brunner Court (at both venues) we curated 20 exhibitions, many community activities and a great variety of workshops. VAC were pleased to be asked to host a number of official & community events from the gallery space.

Emma was always very keen to work with community projects. A notable example was the creation of a collaborative Community Art Work for the ‘Collect’ project led by Katayoun Dowlatsahi, an artist employed by the council to work on a number of public art projects. This involved inviting members of the public who were visiting the gallery to add their individual contributions to a large canvas which was subsequently displayed in the local museum and will now be hung in a public area of the town’s new Memorial Court.

Emma, the youngest and least 'traditional' of the three VAC directors, was always interested in more contemporary projects and performance art. She was instrumental in fund raising activities and in forging links with other galleries and MMU.

Alan Carr
Chairman, Visual Arts
Cheshire
7th October, 2017

The VAC empty shop galleries ran from January 2013 - popping up at certain times in the Present. During this time we have regenerated two town centre empty shop premises turning them into vibrant art gallery and workshop spaces. Services provided by VAC in the course of this study included:

- 20 Art Exhibitions
- Over 20 community art workshops at the gallery
- Providing facilities for artist demonstrations in the public square outside the gallery
- 14 evening cultural events
- Hosted Marie Curie charity Big Tea Party
- 6 community outreach projects
- Shown the work of over 100 local artists
- Created opportunities for new audiences to consider and gain understanding of contemporary art practices.
- Hosted an international collaborative drawing project
- Curated an international mail art project in collaboration with Artist Michael Leigh
- Involved community members in creating 200 dresses for the Dress a Girl Around The World international initiative.
- Created a pop up art installation exhibiting the 200 dresses
- Hosted CWAC reception for Memorial Hall closing procession
- Hosted CWAC Local Government News Award Presentation for Witton Street Regeneration
- Hosted the official opening of Northwich Art Festival

- Hosted Art Up Close – meeting and sharing of skills.
- Developed Knowledge Exchange between Artists, members of the public and the VAC arts organisation
- Contributed free creative workshops for young people at the Northwich Christmas Lights celebration and at Petty Pool School.
- We maintained an artists' discount scheme which is designed to support artists and local art and craft suppliers.

Appendix 8 – Jane Fairhurst – Report on Cross Street Arts and Small Mythologies For A New Era

Jane Fairhurst founder member of Cross Street Arts

In setting up the studio group Cross Street Arts a number of barriers had to be overcome: achieving charitable status (2004) in order to receive rate relief, as a charity, trustees are required to oversee the organization, trustees require protection by the organization becoming a limited company registered with Companies House.

All this whilst introducing contemporary art into a culturally starved area!

During the 18 years since the studio group began we have held annual Open Studio events and regular exhibitions to which the local community have been invited. The response when new people come to visit is always the same “Wow, what an amazing place we never knew this was here on our doorstep!”

Last year's event coincided with the reinstated Standish Christmas Market, held on Cross Street, which brought in many people who'd never visited before.

When the 2008 economic crisis hit the local authority was forced to make cuts and provision for the Arts was the first to go.

At this point Cross Street Arts became the only provider of contemporary visual art in the borough showing work from regional, national and international artists.

The studio group is currently comprises 14 studios and a ground floor gallery space where we hold regular exhibitions of contemporary art. There are 15 studio members and 25 associate members.

We are part of a growing network of independent art providers often visited by new organizations looking for a model studio group when they are setting up.

Small Mythologies for the New Era

Artist - Jane Fairhurst
Curator – Emma Thackham

When Emma contacted me to offer me a solo exhibition I was in the process of preparing a series of work based upon my research into ancient belief systems. Her invitation gave me the opportunity to consolidate my ideas and begin the process of forming my work into a cohesive exhibition.

During my researches and as I was making work for the show I decided upon the title ***Small Mythologies for the New Era***, chosen to reflect a renewed interest in older forms of magic, amulets, talismans and charms, in parts of contemporary Western society.

Emma visited me in my studio to see the work I was making and to discuss plans for the exhibition. She asked me to prepare a proposal for the show ready for a meeting with members of Visual Arts Cheshire.

Her support was vital to win over some of the V.A.C. members who had a more traditional view of art and a fear that the viewing public of Northwich would find my work 'difficult'. However, Emma was keen to bring contemporary, non-traditional art to the town and, as it happened, we found a very receptive audience.

By inviting me to show non-traditional work in Northwich Emma enabled members of the local community to understand that an artwork can be made from any material. Even the most conservative of viewers enjoyed the exhibition as was shown in the feedback I received from visitors to the exhibition, from the comments book and from Emma.

What Emma achieved in Northwich shows her ability to bring contemporary art to a town whose access to visual art had previously meant a journey to Liverpool or Manchester. She also showed her ability to work with those around her and to gently persuade them to step out from their own comfort zones. She has the foresight to see that artists can also be curators and that it is possible to bring art to the high street making it more accessible for local communities who may otherwise never enter a gallery space.

It was a pleasure to work with Emma sharing our knowledge of contemporary art and a desire to bring art to the community using empty properties for pop up exhibitions.

Appendix 9 - Maria Walker - Report on Lightfoot Letters Exhibition

I asked Textile Artist Maria Walker to write a reflection on her experience working with me during the curatorial process of preparing The Lightfoot Letters at The VAC Gallery.

VAC Gallery Northwich 2013

Curated by Emma Thackham

Background

The Lightfoot Letters Exhibition was the result of a collaboration between myself, Maria Walker and a poet, Angela Topping. It is an unusual exhibition in that it has not only a strong narrative content to the artwork but also has an interesting story surrounding the artists, how they met and how this relates to the art. I purchased a bundle of old letters from a Cheshire Antique shop several years ago which turned out to contain an interesting story of a 1920's working class family's life. They were full of stories and anecdotes, which as an artist interested in exploring memory and the overlooked stories of the everyday, I started to use as inspiration for my own narrative-led textile/ mixed media practice., often using images from my own family to stand in for the people in the family. As a result of exhibiting my work I met Angela and after a brief conversation about my work it became apparent that the family writing the letters were her grand parents and father.

Given that we had already established that we had a shared 'artistic language' we decided that we would start to collaborate with the intention of staging an exhibition at the Brindley in Runcorn – as this was the nearest gallery to where Angela's grandparents lived.

What resulted from this collaboration was over 60 pieces of textile of mixed media artwork made by me and a collection of poems written by Angela. There was a cross- fertilisation of ideas, Angela wrote poems in response to my artwork and I took inspiration from the artwork.

Brindley Exhibition

The exhibition was shown at the Brindley Arts Centre and was curated by the visual arts officer there, Louise Hesketh. It is a large modern gallery and some of the pieces of artwork were made specifically for the room.

The exhibition was spread over two rooms and as can be seen from these images on the exhibition, there was a lot of space between each piece of work, although not all of the pieces of work I had delivered had been hung in the exhibition.

Visual Arts Cheshire

When I first saw the VAC Gallery before it had been transformed into a gallery I felt that, whilst I could see the potential of the space, due to the large shop windows on two sides, the space was limited and that I would only be able to display a small proportion of the work I had exhibited previously at the Brindley.

I was quite happy to reduce the amount of work on display as I felt some pieces did not contribute as much as other to the narrative and in some cases I had made multiple pieces on one theme. Since I could not see how the work would fit into such small a space I decided to make Emma responsible for curating the exhibition. I was also interested to see what connections she would make between the work, connections that were free from my artistic intentions.

The first thing that was different between my experience at the Brindley and the VAC was that Emma was interested in me as a person and artist, and wanted to understand my motivations and interests. She also wanted to view the actual work, rather than just relying in photographs, and visited me at my house where I showed her my work. She was also interested in seeing other work I had done and my current more contemporary fine art work.

I had delivered most of the work to Emma the week before the exhibition so that she had a selection of work to choose from, and as I have said I was happy to leave the selection of work and the curating of the exhibition to Emma. The Private View was the first time I saw the exhibition in place and I was surprised that the

same number of pieces had been hung at the VAC gallery as had been hung previously at the Brindley, but the overall effect was quite different. The VAC Gallery turned out to be a lot larger than I had thought as there were three separate spaces/ rooms within it. The pieces were hung a lot closer together than had been the case at the Brindley, but instead of detracting from the overall effect, this did in fact make the exhibition feel much more intimate. Although it was still a gallery space- the intimate feel of the exhibition and the separate rooms made the viewer feel that they were entering the private space of the family from the letters.

I felt like I was entering the home of the family when I entered the gallery. The gallery had been staged as a 'mise en scene', with traces of the family dotted around. A treadle sewing machine, luggage trunks and an old iron had been added to my own artwork giving the appearance that someone actually lived in this space. My own artwork began to blend in and become part of the fabric of the gallery. My washing line installation was hung up at the window, looking as if it had just been hung out. This created a strong visual lure to draw people into the gallery. My photographic collages were hung on the wall, like family portraits, the typewriter installation was in the corner of the room, as if someone had just left off typing a letter and likewise the sewing machine installation looked only recently abandoned.

The two separate rooms had an even more intimate feel and quite separate themes. One of the rooms felt like a woman's bedroom with the corset hanging up, whilst in the other Emma had borrowed an old desk from Angela, which became an area where people could write letters.

The artifacts, photographs and letters were also displayed to appear more intimate. Instead of just displaying the letters on a shelf in the cabinet, Emma had sourced a small metal casket into which the letters were placed just as someone might have actually stored their treasured possessions.

Overall the feeling of the exhibition in the VAC Gallery was an entirely different experience from the Brindley. At the VAC there was a real sense of the family- it felt as if they inhabited the space and had only just left.

The exhibition was really well publicised by the Gallery and was in the local press so it got lots of visitors. The Gallery was packed for the opening night when Angela and I did an artists' talk and poetry reading. Emma had arranged an extra dimension to the evening organising a hot pot supper at the café across the square from the gallery. She came up with this idea in response to a line in the letters which had inspired me to start this body of work, where the father says that he is ' going to a hotpot supper' and he will ' have to use a knife and fork but would rather use a spoon'. Visitors were invited to eat the hotpot supper first, before viewing the exhibition and listening to the talk and poetry, thus providing them with a truly multisensory experience of the evening.

I was very pleased with the experience of exhibiting at the VAC Gallery as I felt that in some ways the exhibition was more accessible to the general public and that Emma had put the work together in a sensitive way. She made the direct connections I had intended with artwork and the poetry, but had also made other connections which added to the viewing experience.

Maria Walker

13.4.2014.

Appendix 9 - Reflection by Angela Topping

I asked Poet Angela Topping to write a reflection on her experience working with me during the curatorial process of preparing The Lightfoot Letters at The VAC Gallery. I talked with her about my research and as she has been a resident in Northwich for many year I asked her to also reflect on the impact that the pop up galleries had made in the community of Northwich.

Statement by Angela Topping ; The Lightfoot Letters at VAC

I am a freelance poet resident in Hartford and very active in the poetry world. I have ten solo poetry publications, and also write critical books and textbooks. I have been active in the area since the 1980s.

Northwich is a difficult location for arts events. There is apathy amongst the population which makes it challenging to gain an audience for the arts. I believe this was part of the impetus behind setting up DAN (the Development of the Arts in Northwich) which was formerly funded by the Arts Council. Since ACE funding has been removed, the arts have suffered. Attendance at events tends to be poor, as people prefer to stay at home, watch TV and so on. I have found this to be the case at many poetry events I have organised, and I was recently booked as a poet to do a free workshop at Northwich Library on National Poetry Day. Only one person attended. Until VAC gallery opened I very rarely went into town, as there was very little there of interest. Since the gallery opened the area nearby has become palpably more vibrant, local businesses have become involved with the gallery's projects and have benefited from the interest VAC has stimulated. I have seen almost every exhibition and it has strongly increased my interest in art, and I have since attended Watercolour classes. VAC also runs workshops, which again has brought art to people with an interest but a lack of opportunity to develop skills.

The first exhibition, which launched the gallery, was one in which I had collaborated with an artist, Maria Walker. The subject of the work was a bundle of letters from 1923, which Maria had purchased in an antiques shop and begun creating art from. We met a few years later and began to collaborate, only to discover that I had a claim on the letters too, as they were written by my father's family when he was 12. The work that grew out of that had already been

exhibited in Runcorn at The Brindley, and went on to appear at Sale Waterside. It will be going to St Andrew's next year as part of the international poetry festival there, StAnza. However, the appearance at VAC was two years after The Brindley, so I believe the showing at VAC contributed to the continued success of this exhibition.

The Private View of The Lightfoot Letters exhibition was extremely well attended. I was reading some of the poems at the event, and Maria Walker was speaking about the process of her art. Some of those attending were friends of either myself or Maria, but others were strangers to us. No-one had come to hear poetry but there was interest in hearing the poems about the letters and lots of copies of the book sold while the exhibition was on. The art mediated the poetry to a readership, and the story of the letters also proved a hook. A surprise was that acclaimed poet and performer, John Hegley, attended the private view. He was in Manchester doing some shows and found out about the exhibition from some friends and decided to come. Hegley is very much in favour of taking poetry out of the academy and making it direct, often using humour to make a serious point. He was very impressed by the exhibition, bought the book and subsequently we have had a small correspondence. For a world class poet to come to a small local exhibition and be impressed by it is quite a reach!

The letters are about a working class family living near a town very much like Northwich. Widnes is a factory town, the population tends to be apathetic towards the arts, compared to a city like Liverpool, which has two major art galleries and several smaller ones. The model of a pop-op gallery like VAC is a sure way to bring art to towns like Northwich and Widnes; if nothing else people will come in out of curiosity. When they do, they are drawn into conversation by the volunteers, who encourage visitors to express their views. This gives people a sense of ownership, even when the art is challenging, as some of the exhibitions, such as Communisumption, have been. From witnessing some of these conversations, it has become obvious to me that the people of Northwich are capable of discussing art and have developed a stronger interest in it because of this gallery.

The gallery has also made me aware of a large community of artists who work in the Northwich area. They support the exhibitions by attending them, and take

part in the Open exhibitions and the popular 20x20 exhibition. The exhibited artists have sold work as a result of the gallery and there has been a good turnover of work to keep interest piqued. The community workshops have improved skills for attenders. I ran a poetry workshop there and it was a lovely venue, and I have learned valuable new skills at a collage workshop, a corset workshop, a Nuno Felting workshop, and plan to attend a felted vessel workshop in the near future.

VAC gallery has also opened its doors to an early evening poetry reading. I invited Sean Body, an Irish-born poet who has been writing for many years. I first met him at Manchester Poets a long time ago and used to co-edit a magazine, Brando's Hat, with him and two others. I had got back in touch with him after he moved to Winsford, and approached DAN Community about what was happening with poetry in the area. He has since kept in touch with VAC and may do something with them at some point. To counter balance Sean, I invited Lindsey Holland, a friend I made on Facebook and went on to help her found North West Poets collective. Her first collection was only just out with Knives Forks and Spoons press, and she was keen to promote it. The third poet I asked was Gill McEvoy, well known in the area and one of the organisers, along with me, of a poetry open floor with guests in Chester, called 'Zest!' Gill is published by Cinnamon, whereas Sean and I both have collections with Lapwing. The audience was small (an example of Northwich apathy perhaps?) so Emma proposed we sat in a circle. I really liked that format. It made for a gentle discussion after each poet had finished and it particularly suited Sean Body's poems, which were about the death of his wife.

I do think poetry is easier to access in some ways than visual art, because language is a medium everyone uses. But then artwork like Maria Walker's has helped mediate the poetry to a wider audience. It's also true that my 'Father, Skating' poem helped Maria access the theme of skating from the letters, as prior to my writing the poem she had found that theme of little interest to her. After I wrote the poem, she produced four pieces of art based on it, which was quite a feature of the exhibition. I do believe that collaboration doubles the audience for the joint work. I know of writers who have collaborated successfully, but personally I would rather work with someone with different skills, like an artist

or musician. The audience is doubled as one form will mediate the other and allow different access points.

The work that Emma Thackham has done with VAC has had a massive positive influence on Northwich, and I hope it can continue in its mission to bring art to the community, rather than hope the community will come to a big city gallery to experience art. VAC has also created opportunities for local artists to have a dialogue with each other and with art lovers.

Angela Topping

24 December 2013

Appendix 10 – Exhibition Review Small Mythologies For The New Era by Charlotte Hawksworth

Small Mythologies for the New Era - Jane Fairhurst Exhibition Review

The exhibition, Small Mythologies for the New Era is a small exhibition full of several well-crafted, intriguing things. The exhibition came about as a result of Fairhurst's research into ancient belief systems and her interest in the aesthetic qualities of the 'power objects' talismans, charms and amulets, of ancient cultures that persist into the 21st century.

Liverpool-born artist, Jane Fairhurst who works as a solo and collaborative artist, also curates with museums, galleries and other artists to bring together archival artefacts, multi-media installations, films and photographs. Fairhurst has exhibited her work in solo, group and collaborative exhibitions for over 20 years and has work in private collections in the UK, Europe, Australia and America. It took 10 years to lead up to this exhibition which was triggered when she read a book about Amulets. Fairhurst describes the themes in her work as political, environmental, socialist and feminist; and she is inspired by many artists including Eva Hesse, and Susan Hiller.



Within this exhibition, Fairhurst has shown a key acknowledgement of the anthropologist and has created a series of pseudo ethnographic and new folk artefacts whereby she invites the viewer into her world of myth and legend, a liminal thread linking past to present to future.

The exhibition is set up in the VAC Gallery in Northwich, Cheshire which is a small market town where art isn't necessarily as accessible as in a city where stumbling into an art gallery is practically unavoidable. Seeing such contemporary art in a small Cheshire gallery is new and refreshing. Visual Arts Cheshire (VAC) is a new arts co-operative in Northwich whose vision is to establish an arts centre that delivers a gallery programme including local, national and international residencies. Their aim is to provide educational facilities for workshops, courses and community projects. The VAC is a 'not for profit' co-operative run by volunteers working closely with the 'Development of the Arts in Northwich' - an organisation which promotes arts events for the people of Northwich and surrounding district.



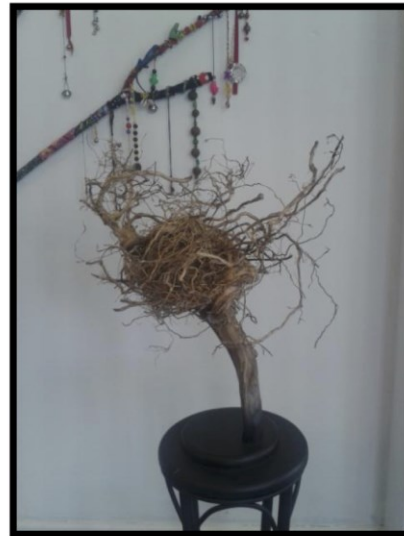
As you enter the gallery, the exhibition room has tables, chairs and exhibits in the centre of the room with art hung on the walls, this layout leads visitors to circulate the room. Due to the nature of the layout, I studied the exhibits in an anti-clockwise route, immediately spotting my favourite piece; Norn Tree.

Norn Tree sits in the top shelf of a glass cabinet against a window which looks onto the cobbled court of the high street. The piece is a small cutting of an ash tree root that has been cleaned up and painted black. It looks like a small tree presented inside a bell jar. Fairhurst has glued thistle down seeds onto the branches. This piece looks extremely delicate and fragile. The warped illusion of the cobbles through the layers of glass and the mirrored image of the piece on the glass shelf all contribute charming aspects which make this piece feel special and admirable. During a question and answer session with the artist, we found out that Norn Tree isn't just a delicate tree. This

aesthetically pleasing and interesting piece which is contained similarly to many other of the exhibits in the room (in a bell jar) ; is a powerful symbol of environmental concerns and themes dating back to Viking times and Pagan beliefs, also drawing upon feminism.

The exhibition takes on an element of Victorianism in the way Fairhurst's art is displayed in plaques, and on podiums and plinths; in bell jars and as trophies. The transformation of found objects is central to her practice. "Using objects that have had a previous life, a history, satisfies both my need to tread a little lighter on the earth and my fascination with the process of transfiguration of objects from their origins into art; a contemporary alchemy." Fairhurst said.

Many of the pieces in this exhibition use toys, sometimes with a dark twist, and have a 'make do and mend' feel. 'Three Wands for Freyr' is a charismatic piece full of keepsakes, friendship bracelets and beads which like many of the other pieces, contained recycled lucky charms which could mean various things to different people. Due to this factor; a lot of visitors can relate to the materials used in the installations. Although this means more people will look at the art more closely, it can also play as a negative when visitors can't see beyond the collection of toys and objects that are used - this is why many of Fairhurst's pieces have been painted black - to help viewers see the art in its new life and not just the toys that were used as materials.



Although I personally found some aspects of this exhibition abnormal, if not disturbing (for example the pieces containing dolls' heads); I believe Fairhurst is a skilled artist with charming personal qualities and great environmental and organic themes. Fairhurst explained that she likes the way her pieces which include dolls' heads and children's toys are bitter-sweet because she believes it is representative of life. I really enjoyed the work on show and having the opportunity to meet Jane and talk to her about her work was brilliant. There is something about her work that inspires me to take my current practice into a more mythological and historical direction, looking at ancient beliefs and how they have changed in modern society.

In conclusion, this exhibition has sparked my creative inspiration and has gratefully triggered me to start to research the several strands of ideas that have been growing over the last few months. The gallery staff were very friendly and helpful and the question and answer session with Jane Fairhurst was an enlivening experience. Finally, I was invited to a private viewing of the next exhibition at the VAC Gallery which is on Friday the 9th of August, and I am volunteering for the day on Monday the 12th which will hopefully give me some insight and experience as to how a gallery is run.



Sunday 4th August 2013

by Charlotte Hawksworth

Sources:

http://www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/10577905.Gallery_hosts_Small_Mythologies_for_the_New_Era/

<http://www.crossstreetarts.co.uk/jane-fairhurst.html>

<http://visualartscheshire.blogspot.co.uk/>

Appendix 11– Exhibition Review Communi Sumption Written by Charlotte Hawkswort

Communi-sumption by Simon Kennedy - Exhibition Review



Communisumption, an exhibition by Simon Kennedy is a show that demonstrates our desire to purchase technical components of a cyber nature and share information over the web. The exhibition was born as a result of Simon Kennedy's frustration with the overwhelming pressure to fit in and submit to our increasingly electronic society.

As you walk into the VAC Gallery, you get a very different appreciation of space than you did a fortnight ago. The layout has changed to facilitate the new exhibition, with extra

furniture and larger installations which give the gallery a much more contemporary feel.

Simon Kennedy studied at Staffordshire University; leaving with a 1st Class honors degree in Fine Art. He has spent the years since as an artist and illustrator; designing a wide range of applications with a highly versatile style.

My first impressions made me very weary that this exhibition is not for me as I fear I am quite old-fashioned when it comes to my preferences with art. Initially I was apprehensive that the exhibition was going to be another show that takes 'contemporary art' to it's limit and I start asking myself what 'art' actually is. However first impressions aside, I feel that this is a much needed exhibition that is both educational and thought provoking. The themes highlighted in this show are concomitant to our present society and may leave you with a lot to think about concerning our attitudes towards technological advances.

The first piece you notice as you walk into the gallery is 'Eat Me (2013)' which plays rather perceptibly with notions of consumption regarding high-tech apparatus such as pc monitors, keyboards and controllers of the past which have been thrown into a large purpose-built yellow take away box which emphasises the short lives these objects have. This piece doesn't look pretty; or even particularly well crafted. Nevertheless, the concept of it is clear and the scale of it underlines the themes which are presented. Not only this; but 'Eat Me' is eye catching and also a conversation starter which is the first of many of the exhibits that encourage interaction between viewers. This, I believe is a definite sign of a successful exhibition.

My favourite exhibit is Twitter Litter (2013) which is a metal dustbin lying on the floor with origami birds spilling out of it. These have a collection of random tweets printed all over them. This piece is Kennedy's attempt of visualising tweets; which he was interested in the way they are fascinating for only a short while before they become obsolete and no longer applicable. I also like the way Kennedy has set up an area which enables the public to engage informally in activity; leaving materials and instructions of how to make the origami



tweets.

Although this may be an over-analytical way of perceiving Simon's intentions, I believe this is a clever way of enhancing his thoughts as those who make an origami tweet will be very pleased with their crafted bird in that moment of elation. However after a short period they will have forgotten about their creation and it becomes discarded - much like the tweets which are created and released online.

I think this is my favourite exhibit because it features more evidence of dexterity. The lines of the birds are clean and sharp which both contrast and compliment the shiny and bowed, undulating edges of the bin - which has clearly never been used for actual rubbish. I am content with the concepts of this piece which are not at first evident and may not have ever even been intended.



A fair few pieces in this exhibition demonstrate conceptual themes rather than traditional art; for example the 'face top trumps' and 'bar chart paintings'. However this is most certainly not a bad thing, and the way in which Simon has approached these subjects are extremely practical and perhaps the most effective and relevant way of presenting his ideas. A couple of the pieces are quite poignant, presenting subjects of social media which are eye-opening and important.

From the reading material available in the gallery; I have formed the opinion that Kennedy is a clever man who can articulate many things clearly in a variety of ways. This is shown in the books that are handy to read and give an insight into the multifariousness of Simon's skills, and the art which is presented in photo albums and in poster format. The techniques of displaying work in this show are unusual for an art exhibition and perhaps more akin to high street phone shops - keeping in theme and emphasised by the commercial aspect of a 'Communi-sumption store' which is set up within the gallery.

In conclusion, Communi-sumption is a successful exhibition that holds thought provoking messages. It presents us with themes that are so obvious within our everyday lives that we are often blind to the fact that technology is taking over. Although this style of art is not my favourite; the show Simon has created and curated is interesting and educational. The techniques within it are fresh and employ good methods of interaction. I believe that this exhibition will affect people of different ages in different ways. For example, I am nineteen and have grown up with technology advancing around me throughout my whole life, so therefore I don't really know any different. But those that are older will remember times without mobile phones and PCs and maybe even without calculators. I predict that this exhibition will have a much stronger and more powerful affect on those that don't see technology as a natural way of communicating and publicising personal events. I believe that this exhibition has the potential to leave viewers with more questions than answers upon departure from the gallery. The messages are extremely clear, however there is no solution that can fix all of the



issues that have been raised. I feel that this is why people will remember this exhibition.

I am grateful to Simon for showing me that contemporary art may be a more effective way of engaging with the public and presenting ideas that would be difficult to approach using traditional techniques. The exhibition has opened my eyes to different ways of exploring themes in more abstract and conceptual ways.

Sources:

<http://smallspacechester.blogspot.co.uk/>

<http://visualartscheshire.blogspot.co.uk/>

<http://justanartstudent.blogspot.co.uk/>

Contact the Gallery through: visualartscheshire@gmail.com

Contact Simon Kennedy through: theartistchester@yahoo.co.uk

Contact Charlotte Hawksworth through: charliepandauk@gmail.com

Join the VAC Gallery Facebook group! <https://www.facebook.com/groups/visualartscheshire/>

by Charlotte Hawksworth

17th August 2013

Appendix 12– Online Discourse with Simon Kennedy

I sought permission to from Simon Kennedy to publish here some of our correspondence on the Facebook Messenger service during the curatorial and artistic process of him developing artwork for Communi-Sumption exhibition. I thought it was useful to share because it demonstrates how I as curator intervened to further develop the concept of the piece 'Friends Top Trumps' appropriate the gallery Facebook friends data in what I conceive of as a tangible act of curatorial smuggling. Kennedy's exhibition was a complex exhibition, scholarly in nature of research he had explored within the themes he had set at play. I was keen to show the exhibition in the informal space of the empty shop gallery setting, a less usual space to encounter contemporary work of that nature and I wanted to create an opening to the multiple discourses contained within it, by involving the galley visitor in the work of art in the directly. That this was done in a surreptitious manner, without their permission, brought up an ethical

dimension to the work that spoke directly to wider themes in the exhibition about the differences between online and offline identities and was intended to provoke the viewer to consider their own relationship as friends of VAC in a the gallery setting. That Kennedy required me, as curator, to take responsibility for appropriating the data in this way supported the exploration of my role as curatorial smuggler.

11/06/2013 04:34

Hi Simon, I have had a few ideas about how your project might sit with VAC though, the work/proposal as it stands would be quite challenging for our audience in Northwich I feel, it is important to me from a curatorial perspective that any audience member can enter a dialogue with the work we programme so I wondered if you might be interested in discussing a few ideas I had to open up the work a little, to make it a little more accessible without dumbing it down. I wondered if we might develop your profile type idea and appropriate the data from the VAC facebook friends pages. What I envision is a wall based display of the profile images of VAC friends with their stats, in much the same format as you have developed. This could be accompanied by live data streams projected onto the wall (plus your graphs. Light boxes & video etc) live data could include, VAC best friend, most commented images, tweets retweeted , people not engaging for 3 days etc? We'd also continue the origami tweets idea and get visitors making them in the gallery. These are just my first thoughts in response to our chat so lets continue talking about ideas, feel free to tell me if you don't like the idea of using VAC as a live data source. Bests for now, Emma

11/06/2013 14:32

Hi Emma,

Yes I think it would work to appropriate VAC friends data and use this as the

content on the cards (provided permission was granted by the various individuals to use that info, profile pictures etc). A live data stream would also be fine although at this point I'm not sure exactly how these pieces of information from different sources could be amalgamated into a singular stream if that makes sense and also maybe need to think about the relevance of this in terms of what exactly is this streaming saying? "Communi-sumption" has often received a certain amount of caution from galleries but I should say that I have often discussed the ideas and themes of this show with regular people (non artists) and they do generally seem enthusiastic and interested in the work, if for no other reason than they can immediately relate to it in their own lives. Its important for me as an artist to confront people with work that may be slightly more challenging than what they are used to, otherwise artistic audiences can't progress in alignment with the many progressions in the visual arts world. Essentially this results in the gap getting larger and larger between what artists create and the viewers understanding of what has been created. So yes, I am keen not to dumb down the work but I don't think what you have suggested is of detriment to the work in any way.

Keep me posted with regards to what the rest of the committee think and I'll speak soon, regards Simon.

13/06/2013 12:40

Ok I can't see the point in appropriating data with permission, I think it would be much more interesting as an artwork to directly appropriate the data and in doing so create an opening for dialogue around the subject? What do you think?
Bests, Emma

13/06/2013 13:40

Hi Emma, I say with permission out of courtesy really as I didn't want to upset any members of your group who may not like the idea of their information being made public in a gallery context. I realize this seems rather contradictory since the info is in the public domain anyway but people are funny sometimes. I think

because you have suggested using VAC profiles as opposed to the anonymous ones I have originated, then the gallery would really have to take responsibility for that if people were not happy or any complaints were received. Hope this makes sense, get in touch if you want to discuss it further.

Appendix 13 - Minutes from Consultation

One of my last tasks as director of VAC gallery was to convene a consultation meeting to help secure the future of the project.

Minutes VAC Gallery, Consultation Meeting - 14th January, 2014.

Agenda

- Fundraising and Finance
- New Director required
- Workshops
- Fundraising Ideas / Sponsorship
- What does VAC do well?
- What can VAC improve on?
- Vision for the Future

Summary by the Chairman

1. The **lease** has now been extended to 4th April, by CWAC. We currently pay $\frac{1}{4}$ rent. The gallery costs us £700 per month including 20% rates and all utilities.
2. We need an increase in funds to ensure bills are met. DAN, signs our lease and will terminate the agreement if insufficient funds aren't available.
3. Currently working on an application to the Arts Council for a grant.
4. Launched new **workshop programme**. This can be problematic as there are often 'no shows' and the gallery loses money. We need a system whereby payment is made in full at the time of booking or a deposit taken.
5. VAC has **Business Advisors** assigned by Business NW and CWAC.
6. Status is 'Not for Profit' but we could change to charitable status in the future.
7. **Premises** : CWAC will review our status in March to assess whether we are sustainable or not. The Memorial Court will open in 2016 and we need an interim cultural space, none has been identified in the new building.
8. Need help with Marketing and Publicity. Does anyone have those skills?
9. **CWAC** have websites that do not advertise the VAC Gallery and this needs to be addressed through our Locality Officer. VAC Programme can be advertised via the COS site and also Watercolour classes with artists.

10. **New Premises** : Visits to available buildings identified by CWAC and our reasons for rejecting them were discussed. Alternative sites that we are considering were identified.
11. We are now eligible for the **Buy Art Scheme** with 0% interest.
12. The possibility of Corporate Nights could be offered in bigger premises.
13. **Questions** as to who funds DAN were asked and what is happening to the Salt Museum / Workhouse and other tourist attractions and heritage buildings in Northwich.
14. **Structure** of VAC : Currently consists of 3 Directors, one of whom is stepping down, but still wants to be involved on the Steering Committee. **A new Director** is sought and new members to join a Steering committee to ensure current operations and the future of VAC.
15. There are huge demands on the current Directors who are not able to complete many tasks because of being directly involved in the day to day running of the gallery.
16. A possible **Friends of VAC** group was discussed as a way of getting a commitment and funds. What would the expectations and charges be was discussed? The current operating costs of CAN were used as an example.
17. The **Discount scheme** was also discussed. Local shops could be targeted as they would want VAC to do well and bring an increased footfall into the town.
18. **Individual and Corporate membership** to VAC was also discussed. Target local businesses such as Tata and the HUT Group. We have currently contacted Tata, and numerous supermarkets without a result.
19. **Associate Membership for Artists** was mentioned with % discount on workshops. A % on sales should be increased, but this was felt that it could price buyers out of the original art market.
20. It was noted that as a **Community Gallery** we should be nurturing new talent, supporting existing artists and encouraging emerging artist. If we offered a Friends of: for all artists, this could be problematic as weaker artist may insist on exhibiting alongside more professional artists and this could result in a lowering of standards. We must have a complete range of work, standards and backgrounds of artists. Sales are not currently reaching their potential our % of sales are better than other galleries in Chester and Frodsham. We also act as a springboard for artists to move onto bigger galleries.
21. To **achieve** all that we hope to, the audience was invited to make comments on 'Paste it notes' under the Agenda headings. Offers to serve on the **Steering Committee** were encouraged and a meeting arranged in the very near future.

Everyone was thanked for attending and details of this meeting would be circulated.

Response from the Public

Fundraising and Finance

- Artists talking about their own work. [Evenings]
- Gallery space for local groups.

- Approach local WI's to inform about workshops planned. Funds available from Education fund.
- Small Grants Schemes. [Details to be sent to VAC Chairman]
- Competitions, Design a Xmas Card or Calendar.
- Exhibitions based on local themes: Tata, Roberts Bakery, Salt.
- Valentines, related exhibitions and fundraisers.
- Costs of events must be affordable and not exclude low- income families.
- Deposits for workshop bookings.
- Big Draw Campaign
- Room hire for artist led workshops.
- Corporate / Social nights at bigger premises.
- Gallery hire for Solo exhibitions.

Workshops

- Children's workshops : term time or school holidays. [Artist must be CRB checked]
- Quick Draw
- Speed Painting
- Offer a reduced fee for advance payment, will encourage people to attend and discourage the no shows.
- We Love Mum workshop or in Memory of.
- Art Lectures similar to Adrian Sumner's.
- Drop in photo shoots with dressing up costumes.
- Workshops in the evenings and Saturdays.
- It was said that VAC offer a good variety of workshops at present.

Fundraising Ideas and Sponsorship

- Charging a membership / monthly rate.
- Membership is primarily for artists selling work.
- Offer a Discount to those that pay in advance.
- Negotiate a Discount in local shops for Friends of VAC.
- Approach local shops for Friends of status and they advertise the VAC logo. Say £50 to £100.
- Auction of donated work.
- Monthly Raffle of donated artwork.
- School workshops, High schools to exhibit for small fee.
- Corporate sponsorship – The Hut Group, Tata.
- More evening and weekend workshops.
- Membership schemes as discussed, free open entries.
- Approach shops and corporate bodies for sponsorship.
- Glass cabinets, charge per month to display and % of any sales.
- In larger premises, sofas and coffee machines: £2 plus.
- Sponsorship, one off payments from the Banks in the Bull Ring, Charitable donations.
- Sponsorship from Roberts Bakery, Director is keen to support local ventures.

- Corporate membership / sponsorship. Target all major employers.
- Friends membership and Corporate membership.
- Advertising eg Brochures, leaflets.
- Bird Raffle? SM
- Call them Supporters NOT Friends, then have members selected [as artists]
- Friends of / Artists of / Membership Groups with % off for Age as an advantage.
- Raffle of artist's work, each artist gives one piece of work. Sell number of tickets at say £25 each. In the Draw everyone wins!
- Friends of...no hanging fee for artists, free discount cards.
- Friends of of VAC, scheme – fee x per annum = discount cards+ % of workshops + calendar AND Associate Membership = fee x p/a to stock in retail area.

Results of community consultation from Post it Notes

What do VAC do well?

- Welcoming atmosphere and not clique like some groups.
- Good atmosphere, open to all.
- Friendly, supportive, positive and kind.
- Friendly and approachable.
- The variety of exhibitions, it encourages me to keep coming to the gallery.
- Community space and involvement.
- Variety in the art shown.
- Very approachable.
- Vac has opened up a creative avenue for all manner of artists, experienced or not.
- It has brought an artistic community together.
- VAC offers a warm welcome and makes art accessible to all.

What can VAC do better at?

- VAC are not financially 'savvy'.
- The financial structure needs to be set in stone and not open to negotiation.
- Better marketing, forward planning and announcing events 3 months in advance.
- Need to be more business minded.
- Promotion and an awareness of Social Media.

Vision for the Future

- A major venue for emerging contemporary and local artists.
- Working with local artists and building strong links with the community.
- Shouldn't all or most of Mid Cheshire Arts, DAN and VAC etc be integrated? Save on costs and space.
- CAN & VAC should be creating jobs! CWAC should be supporting this.

- An artists network, working together, collaboratively & exhibiting collectively.
- Skill sharing sessions for artist members.
- Northwich colleges, FE and HE exhibitions.
- Appoint a Fund Raising Administrator